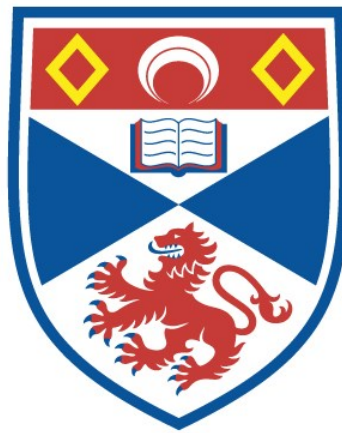


# IN-BETWEEN WORLDS: EXPLORING TRAUMA THROUGH FANTASY

Amber Leigh Francine Shields

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews



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# In-Between Worlds: Exploring Trauma through Fantasy

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University of  
St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)  
at the University of St Andrews

September 2017

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## **Abstract**

While fantasy as a genre is often dismissed as frivolous and inappropriate, it is highly relevant in representing and working through trauma. The fantasy genre presents spectators with images of the unsettled and unresolved, taking them on a journey through a world in which the familiar is rendered unfamiliar. It positions itself as an in-between, while the consequential disturbance of recognized world orders lends this genre to relating stories of trauma themselves characterized by hauntings, disputed memories, and irresolution. Through an examination of films from around the world and their depictions of individual and collective traumas through the fantastic, this thesis outlines how fantasy succeeds in representing and challenging histories of violence, silence, and irresolution. Further, it also examines how the genre itself is transformed in relating stories that are not yet resolved. While analysing the modes in which the fantasy genre mediates and intercedes trauma narratives, this research contributes to a wider recognition of an understudied and underestimated genre, as well as to discourses on how trauma is narrated and negotiated.

## **Acknowledgements**

This has been a journey that has taken me into the uncomfortable and unfamiliar and whose end still remains unknown. Along the way, others have provided hope, reassurance, and the tools and magic necessary to move forward. I am grateful to my advisor Leshu Torchin for the great care and attention she put into reading all my drafts and the passion in her comments. I was blessed in this process with supportive parents, Jordan and Kathy Shields, as well as an equally supportive family that I found in the postgraduate community that have all encouraged and sustained me. I want to especially thank Eileen Rositzka, Ana Grgić, Rohan Berry Crickmar, Marta Crickmar, Isabel Seguí, Ben Walden Naylor, Jennifer Whitty, Connor McMorran, Diana Popa, Giles Taylor, Jonny West, and Kristin Ginger who discussed ideas, read drafts, and listened and offered support throughout this process.



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# Chapter 1: Introduction

*“The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there”* (L.P. Hartley)

## 1.1 In-Between Worlds

*El laberinto del fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*, Guillermo del Toro, 2006), the acclaimed fairytale about young Ofelia's (Ivana Baquero) quest to restore her place as a princess during the final days of the Spanish Civil War, starts in a space between a historical and fantastic narrative. Before any appearance or mention of fairies and magical quests, the film introduces its story much as a historical document. The first image in the film is an authoritative text declaring the setting to be “Spain, 1944” and then describing the war's background. This set up, associated with the historical film, is a brief reminder that despite the fantastic journey that will unfold, this film is also one about a troubled time in history.

Introducing itself as one thing, the film quickly steers from the course of a historical film as it integrates the other driving narrative of the story: fantasy. The camera reveals the bleeding body of Ofelia, circles around the dying girl, and zooms into her eye as a way to enter the fairy tale kingdom of which she dreams. The visual transition to a fairy tale realm is accompanied with the familiar textual cue: “Once upon a time...” that tells the audience that they are leaving the specific location of “Spain, 1944” and entering into another space.

As the film introduces the characters, it more importantly introduces the spaces whose conflicting worlds lead to the film's violence. The visualization of Princess Moanna's story about losing her kingdom emphasizes this interest in worlds as it focuses not on the princess, but on her kingdom. Here the film showcases a miniature construction of an underground world of castles through which a blurry image of a princess fleetingly

passes. As the story continues with the narration of the princess' suffering upon leaving her underground realm and entering the human world, the camera pans up from the constructed set to settle on the very real and recognizable destroyed city of Belchite.<sup>1</sup> This iconic city, preserved in its state of ruin, is a familiar landmark of the Spanish Civil War and thus a strong visual cue that represents the transition from the constructed fantasy of Moanna's kingdom to the world of Civil War Spain that Ofelia, Moanna's incarnate, must traverse.<sup>2</sup>

Engrossed in her fairy tale, Ofelia is oblivious to these surroundings of Spain's past that pass by the windows of the proudly decorated Falangist convoy that will transport her and her mother, as well as the country, towards their future. These spaces of displacement and transition juxtapose the ruined Republic and the new, Falangist world. Fantasy and historical reality are combined and the ruins of the past are shown to still represent a haunting presence in the fairy tales and reality of Spain's present.

The merging of divergent spaces in the film's opening sequence is provocative as it creates a troubled space in-between worlds, leading not only to violence in the story, but to questions regarding the place of this film in a larger history of an unresolved past. How does this fantasy and its fantasy world fit within a historical debate of a war that left the country divided more than 70 years ago? And how does it contribute to the continued debate of this war that, in its haunted return, continued to divide people between opinions and states when these debates returned to a national platform again decades later?

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<sup>1</sup> Belchite has served as a site of symbolism and memory of the Spanish Civil War since as early as 1940 when a drawing of the city appeared on the cover of the Francoist magazine *Reconstrucción* (Smith, 2007: 4). Even in the process of forgetting and moving on from the past, the country kept physical reminders, like the city of Belchite or Franco's monument The Valley of the Fallen, which also marked the landscape with these memories. In its still visible destruction, Belchite not only never left the past but is marked by and marketed for its haunting reminder of this era.

<sup>2</sup> The film takes place in the final days of the Civil War, which for all intents and purposes is over, though few pockets of resisters remain.

Through its fantasy, *Pan's Labyrinth* explores many of the haunting themes of trauma that, from its painful loss of home and identity to its haunted pasts and stifled futures, all contribute to the shaping of trauma as an unsettled intermediate that has one foot forever in the past and the other reaching for an unattainable unknown. As it brings these worlds together to reside in one space, *Pan's Labyrinth* is striking as it projects this state of limbo within a film that is caught between the haunted memories and varied returns of the past. In this unsettled space of the in-between, past and present merge, history and the imaginary become part of the same story, and the unbelievability of trauma is presented in a state where it is believable.

The use of fantasy bridges not only places but times. With the film released almost seventy years after the end of the Spanish Civil War, *Pan's Labyrinth* came out at a time when a new generation was undertaking a renewed national discussion of Spain's history. Using the fairy tale's transtemporal and transnational qualities to represent an experience that has also moved beyond borders and across generations, the film brings the memory of the war into collective discourses that include those who were not there. Further as this national discussion was widely publicized and also inspired a cultural boom that crossed Spain's borders, the national reconciliation process became one that also extended across an international sphere. Through fantasy that brings together multiple actors and storylines, *Pan's Labyrinth* offers a place to reflect on how trauma is transmitted and processed beyond an affected region and time as the past comes to haunt the present in diverse ways.

*Pan's Labyrinth* represents a key intersection between a history of national and personal trauma and the fantasy genre. Further its artistic accomplishments as a film as well as its abilities to be celebrated not only in an affected region who had lived through and was continuing to live through the aftermath of the events depicted, but on the

international stage as well points to an intersection between fantasy and real trauma that inspires investigation rather than dismissal.<sup>3</sup> This scrutiny at once offers a rich exploration of the use of fantasy as a popular genre in representing trauma while also opening it up to criticism for the intertwining of fantasy and history. On the one hand, fantasy creates a mode to work through some of the problems presented by relating trauma, such as troubled expression, nonlinear narratives, and its sometimes unbelievability. On the other hand, the use of the fantasy genre instigates its own problems. In taking on tales of historical traumas, fantasy runs the danger of accusations of inappropriateness and insincerity. However, while the genre might produce such hasty assumptions, films like *Pan's Labyrinth* and the ones examined in this study are anything but disingenuous. The use of fantasy to tell tales of trauma which can at once be celebrated and condemned leads to the question: What function can fantasy serve as a mode for expressing and addressing real life histories of horror and suffering caused by political upheaval?

This thesis answers this question by examining a diverse group of films and their depictions of individual and collective traumas through fantasy. Through case studies of the films *Hikayatul jawahiri thalath* (*Tale of the Lost Jewels*, Michel Khleifi, 1995), *Podzemlje: Bila Jednom Jedna Zemlja* (*Underground*, Emir Kusturica, 1995), *Los rubios* (*The Blondes*, Albertina Carri, 2003), *L'image manquante* (*The Missing Picture*, Rithy Panh, 2013), and *Vals im Bashir* (*Waltz with Bashir*, Ari Folman, 2008), this work points to how fantasy succeeds in representing and challenging histories of violence, silence, and irresolution. Further, it also examines how the genre itself is transformed when it is used to relate stories that are not yet resolved. While analysing the modes in which the fantasy

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<sup>3</sup> The film was an international success and won awards at varied venues, including the Academy Awards (USA), BAFTAs (UK), Arieles (Mexico), and Goyas (Spain) as well as international festivals like Cannes.

genre mediates and intercedes trauma narratives, this research contributes to a wider recognition of an understudied and underestimated genre, as well as to discourses on how trauma is narrated and negotiated.

## **1.2 Questions of Representing Trauma**

Unsettled, traumatic histories of individuals and collectives present a number of challenges to representation, leading to questions ranging from what can and should be represented and what should stay buried in the past to how it should be represented and received. Traumatic events can be underpinned by difficulties in representation as they are defined by a crisis. In her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Cathy Caruth cites Shoshana Felman's assertion of trauma leading to a "crisis in truth" leading us to ask ourselves "how we in this era can have access to our own historical experience, to a history that is in its immediacy a crisis to whose truth there is no simple access" (1995: 2). This, in turn, can lead to an emphasis on the unrepresentable nature of the crisis which, compounded by an overwhelming desire to respect the experience, at times can provoke a denial of representation and make it unapproachable (Kaplan and Wang, 2008; Lowenstein, 2005). Even in an age of overt exposure to violence, there are still some subjects deemed as those that should not be seen nor heard. Despite these difficulties and debates, there is no lack of fictional and nonfictional accounts of violence and its aftermath. This drive to articulate, present, and witness trauma, as well as a media saturated culture that documents and shows everything, has resulted in most heinous acts being subjects of representation and interpretation. With this increased accessibility comes a proactive debate about not only how one can, but how one should approach and represent violence and its traumatic legacies.



The proliferation and familiarity with trauma representations leads to expectations regarding the form these representations will take. As such, trauma has begun to develop if not quite its own genre, at least its own mode of representation with certain expectations. In the realm of fiction films there are recognized genres, such as the war film, or aesthetics, like fragmented modernist aesthetics as supported by Cathy Caruth in her influential studies of trauma representations (1995, 1996), that have become associated with trauma. Nonfiction films have taken the role of “supplement[ing] witness testimonies with ‘authentic’ imagery” (Hamilton, 2013b: 171); providing images of the real people and places that visually corroborate the stories told. What happens when, as Annette Hamilton observes, “this strategy is not possible” (2013b: 171) or perhaps not even desired?

As representations move beyond reporting trauma and into explorations of the reflection and reconciliation processes of what in many cases is a continually lived reality, these expectations do not always reflect or serve the needs of processing trauma. Thus, while on the one hand trauma representation seems to become familiar, it nevertheless surprises. Representational expectations continue to be defied as new means and modes are generated to relate that which is unpredictable and unfamiliar. Despite the proliferation of trauma representations and studies, there is still more room for exploration regarding the different ways moving image culture can manifest and be employed in approaching this contentious subject.

This study will contribute to the exploration of alternative and contentious modes

of representation to consider their contributions to portraying and reconciling trauma. It takes inspiration from trauma film scholars like Janet Walker and Adam Lowenstein who in their works on fantasy in documentary and national trauma horror films have questioned how the unimaginable circumstances of trauma can lead to what can be viewed as “unimaginable” cinema. Building upon the groundwork they laid in terms of accepting personal fantasies and the horror genre as ways not just to represent, but to add something new to the conversation of how trauma is experienced and returns for both the individual and nation, this work focuses on fantasy as a genre and how it represents points of personal and historical upheaval not as an allegory but as a storyline that intertwines with and at times becomes the fantasy. This work will thereby focus on how and why the appeal to use fantasy as a genre supersedes debates surrounding how trauma should be represented.

### **1.3 Questions of Representing Fantasy**

Fantasy is a genre surrounded by prejudices not just with regards to the study of serious subjects like trauma, but also in film studies in general. In terms of film, Katherine Fowkes notes how “the label ‘fantasy’ has often been pejorative, applied to films seen to be trivial or childish, or said to seduce us with unrealistic wish-fulfillment” and that even with success it is “still a genre struggling to be taken seriously” (2010: 1-2). Yet despite critical difficulties, the genre itself is based on the popular and continues to hold great attention and relevance. Fantasy films have offered some of the century’s greatest blockbusters, such as the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Peter Jackson, 2001-2003) and the *Harry Potter* series (Chris Columbus, Alfonso Cuarón, Mike Newell, David Yates, 2001-2011), and viewers continue to flock to cinemas to see sci-fi and fantasy action thrillers and fairy tale remakes.

Filmmakers telling tales of real life collective and individual violence and trauma have also turned to fantasy. *La vita è bella* (*Life is Beautiful*, Roberto Benigni, 1997) and *Pan's Labyrinth* both became international hits that told the stories of the Holocaust and the Spanish Civil War,<sup>4</sup> respectively, through fantasy. Celebrated auteurs such as Emir Kusturica (*Podzemlje: Bila Jednom Jedna Zemlja, Underground*, 1995), Elia Suleiman (*Chronicle of a Disappearance*, 1996 and *Yadon ilaheyya, Divine Intervention*, 2002), and Bahman Ghobadi (*Lakposhtha parvaz mikonand, Turtles can Fly*, 2004) have all won numerous awards for their depictions through fantasy of the violent break-up of Yugoslavia, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Iraq War and Kurdish prosecution. Recent documentary films that have received a great amount of attention have also heavily relied on fantasy in relating episodes of war, genocide, and their extended repercussions. *Waltz with Bashir, Nostalgia de la luz (Nostalgia for the Light*, Patricio Guzmán, 2010), *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012), and *The Missing Picture* are all films that demonstrate the innovative ways that fantasy continues to thrive and present itself in documentaries.<sup>5</sup>

The success and cinematic accomplishments of these films have drawn critical attention beyond the realm of fantasy scholars, with several of these films producing what would amount to entire catalogues of individual research. What has been overlooked in these discussions, however, is the question of why, despite disparate circumstances and potential genre prejudices, the fantasy genre continues to be used to relate these particular

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<sup>4</sup> Like *Pan's Labyrinth*, *Life is Beautiful* also received several awards and nominations from various national and international awards ceremonies and festivals, it won the Grand Prize at Cannes and Best Foreign Language Film at the Academy Awards and director/actor Roberto Benigni won a Best Actor award from the Academy, BAFTA, Screen Actors Guild, and David di Donatello Awards.

<sup>5</sup> In all the films presented here as well as in this study, the degree to which fantasy appears and to which the films might be labelled as fantastic varies. These films, it is argued, have all demonstrated key elements of fantasy that, even when brief, shape the overall story and feel of the film.

histories. Why is fantasy as a storytelling mode so intriguing and what does it have to offer to debates about the very real experiences of violence and trauma?

The films examined in this study provide points of reflection on this subject and its global reach. *Underground*, *Waltz with Bashir*, and *The Missing Picture* are fiction and documentary films that use fantasy to represent trauma and have been internationally acclaimed by viewers, critics, and scholars. While the two other films of this study, *The Blondes* and *Tale of the Lost Jewels*, have had less of an impact on the international stage, Carri's work provoked a resounding debate in Argentina and Khleifi's film contributed to a rich culture of fantasy works surrounding the continued struggle and violence experienced by Palestine. Another intriguing aspect that brings these films together is that all of the directors have personal connections to the traumas depicted. The question this begets is why would directors, who have been personally traumatized and who have experienced their family and friends being hurt, killed, or displaced, choose fantasy? The diverse circumstances and cultural backgrounds behind these films show that beyond commercial interest there is a fascination with fantasy that can contribute to trauma debates and studies.

In this research, I consider fantasy as a genre that, rather than being inappropriate in addressing trauma, can actually contribute to representing its unsettled nature. If trauma is the shattering of the known world (Kaplan and Wang, 2004), representing trauma, then, is a way to collect these broken pieces and build a new world from this past. As described by E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang, trauma leaves a "need to bestow a new form—narrative or image—upon the obscure traumatized state through imaging" with the "socio-historical imagination" providing "the capacity for self-imaging and consequently for creating new sets of objects in the world" (2004: 13). Fantasy, as that which resides between the known

world (the pre-traumatic world) and the unknown (the world overturned in trauma's wake and the dreams of what it will become), is a productive genre for representing the uncertainty that follows the shattering events of trauma and the imagination that can provide the confrontation and construction in its aftermath. As these tales move between worlds, they intertwine narratives, histories, and dreams that create a provocative and multi-layered experience troubling the known and the familiar. Further, by bringing together multiple and sometimes conflicting experiences, fantasy presents a space to reflect upon and question the unfinished business of trauma. This space can contribute to a dialogue that looks to re-evaluate and re-narrate the present and past in its quest to move forward.

Looking at a selection of fiction and nonfiction fantasy films from around the world, this study explores the use of fantasy as a genre whose characteristics reflect the unsettled nature of trauma. This is especially appealing in cases, as examined here, in which the violence and its aftermath remain unresolved in collective narratives. These films address cases that, because of silences and suppressions by other dominant narratives, are not fully developed and still struggle to be expressed. Further their peripheral and sometimes controversial status leaves space to explore these experiences at a premium. In these cases, fantasy's openness to and exploration of the unknown and unstable offers an opportunity to navigate uncharted and unsettled histories. While each example comes from a unique context and use of fantasy, the shared return to fantasy in circumstances of suppressed or difficult histories demonstrates that despite stigmas and debates, fantasy has something to offer in the telling of trauma.. As trauma representations continue to abound in cinema, exploring the different forms and their contributions to the subject allows for a more comprehensive understanding of trauma as well as its expression, representation, and

processing. A thorough reflection on the applications of fantasy in these instances allows for a more nuanced appreciation of this genre and its place in cinema and society.

#### **1.4 Applying Fantasy to Troubled Transitions**

All of the films examined here show that trauma does not exist on a linear timeline but that, even looking back, it disturbs this notion as it can continue to make the past present even years after a precipitating violent moment. Not past nor present, trauma is a state of in-between and, in the most productive cases, transition. Fantasy is also examined here as a state of intermediacy and transition. In fact, especially in the cases of the fairy tales in this study, the fantasy used presents a recognized narrative of transition. One of the major themes of this work will therefore be the state of intermediacy presented by trauma and how, in turn, fantasy as offering its own in-between state of transition is an appealing genre for trauma representation and reflection.

While the fantastic, and especially the fairy tale, narrative can offer a structure that leads to a resolved state out of this transition, as the films examined here show, the deep effects of trauma in these cases have not reached a final conclusion at this stage and the state of transition continues. Looking again at *Pan's Labyrinth* can start to point to why, despite these questions of representation between trauma and fantasy, that fantasy still might be an appealing form and further how it can contribute to and reflect the state of trauma as a troubled transition. What *Pan's Labyrinth* highlights, and what will be explored in the case studies presented here, are three main points of interest: the depiction of transitions that reflect the unresolved stories both in terms of the film's narrative lines as well as the history being represented, the intertwining of narratives, and how fantasy can be used to bring these unresolved histories into public discourse.

*Pan's Labyrinth* presents several transitions that highlight the violence of change as well as the larger issues at stake in these changes. Ofelia's journey reflects a common fairy tale trope of a narrative in which a child becomes an adult. What complicates Ofelia's already painful transition into womanhood is that this is occurring under the violent transition of a country that is still carrying out the last battles of a civil war.<sup>6</sup> As Ofelia fights to restore a sense of place (by attempting to reach the underground kingdom) and identity (as Princess Moanna), the film offers a parable of the memory and place of the war itself in history. The traumatic loss of place and position, and the resulting quest for their restoration, motivates both the characters and the film itself in its re-telling of history. Ofelia's departure from her war-torn city, and her father who has died in the midst of this upheaval, leaves her in a place where she is isolated and alone, looking for allies (Mercedes) and encountering new enemies (Vidal). In this unfamiliar place, Ofelia must not only survive the forceful imposition of changes that her country is going through, but must also discover her own maturation at this time. Alone and facing these difficult changes, Ofelia creates her own figure of authority in the Faun (Doug Jones) and constructs her own trajectory to work through these changes in a manner in which she is familiar: the fairy tale.

Ofelia's story highlights the transitory stages of fantasy and trauma. Ofelia is in-between spaces and identities: she can no longer be a girl and is not yet a woman, and she longs to leave her reality behind and enter the space of the underground kingdom by

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<sup>6</sup> Becoming a woman offers its own forms of violence. Ofelia watches her mother (Ariadna Gil) become "sick with child" and eventually die during child birth. She also faces becoming a woman in a Fascist society that, as demonstrated in Vidal's own violence against woman, does not offer the hope and opportunity for woman that was partially realized in Republican Spain. Marina Warner notes how fairy tales, in their stories and in their sharing by female story tellers, often addressed themes of gender violence, from early marriage to being sent to new households to facing the worst of household starvation, and offered sources of inspiration for those encountering these difficulties in their own lives (1994).

becoming a princess. In order to complete this transition she must undertake a journey, in this case a fairy tale quest, that looks to end at a settled identity and home. This position of being on a journey between places and identities is a state that is repeated through the films studied here. As violence destroys homes, new homes must be sought. As political regimes and experiences of war, death, and violence reshape individual, familial, and national identities, they solicit new understandings of who one is and how to reconcile past identities with present and future ones. Like Ofelia, the protagonists of the films in this study are also on a journey between states, making fantasy's ability to reflect through its own intermediate state the theme of traumatic transitions a point of interest.

Ofelia's story of transition as enacted through her fairy tale quest for a lost kingdom and rebellion against her Francoist stepfather Captain Vidal (Sergi López) is told in parallel to and mirrors that of the continued Republican resistance of the Maquis after their defeat in the Spanish Civil War.<sup>7</sup> As such, instead of being an allegory for Spain's own transitions out of war, these stories become intertwined and are both presented as equal narratives. These states of intermediacy for the characters and the nation reflect and propel each other through the overall narrative of the film, showing that in reality they bear a greater resemblance and are closer to each other than what it might first seem.

Fantasy is used in the films in this study not to stand in for or be an allegory of history, but instead is presented as an integral part of these troubled histories. This distinction is important as the films here use fantasy to trouble the notion that there is one interpretation of the past and instead that these pasts and their legacies of violence are much more nuanced and include a wide range of experiences that come in different forms. These pasts

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<sup>7</sup> The Maquis were Spanish guerrillas who, having fought on the side of the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War, continued to wage resistance against the Francoist regime until the 1960s. Mainly confined to the mountains in sympathetic regions, they also fought against the Nazi and Vichy regime in France.



are thus also shown to be in their own in-between state as they are opened to new perspectives that have been sidelined or not fully addressed but that are also part of these histories and thus part of any sought reconciliation.

Looking beyond the film's narratives at its contextual production and consumption, it can further be seen how these efforts of reviewing and rewriting the past in the film correlate with Spain's own renewed address of its past. Just as Ofelia and the Maquis seek and, to varying degrees, succeed in reclaiming their positions in lost spaces (the underground kingdom and Spain, respectively), so too were the silenced ghosts of the past reclaiming a space in Spanish history at the time of the film's release. The exhumation of bodies in mass graves had begun to resurface and return these lost pasts to families and the country.<sup>8</sup> In its own exhumation of the past, the film also contributed to the country's debate of how to address a past that had been buried for so long and whose memories were not only engrained in and passed down through individuals, but shaped the country's landscape. In the case of *Pan's Labyrinth*, fantasy acts in the film to disrupt a dominant Spanish narrative that had buried this rebellious past and highlight the multiple narratives still to be taken into account. This unresolved history in the film enters into a larger historical debate happening at the moment of the film's release as the film reflects and becomes part of a larger societal transition.

The films examined here are part of larger political and cultural debates surrounding the histories they depict. While this might provoke controversy, as in *Underground's* case,

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<sup>8</sup> This effort has even extended to the most symbolic places of Spain's Francoist past as in 2016 there was an exhumation in The Valley of the Fallen, which serves as a grave to Franco's opposition as well as the General himself. After a battle in first the criminal and then the civil court system in Spain, and an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights, the granddaughter of Manuel and Antonio Ramiro Lapeña won her case to exhume the bodies of her family from the crypt and hold a proper burial. While some applauded the continued fight for justice and the chance to open this sacred ground for further examination, it was also viewed as rekindling divisions in Spain between Franco supporters and opposition (Badcock, 2016).

they might also open up debate around a subject that has been largely silenced, like *The Missing Picture*, or add new perspectives to these historical debates as seen in the case of *The Blondes*. How fantasy can bring and integrates these perspectives into public debates on these periods is a driving question of this thesis and will be explored in the context of these individual cases.

### **1.5 Intervention: Approaching Trauma through Fantasy**

Contemporary fantasy scholars have greatly contributed to mounting a defence of the fantastic form against long standing stigmas by demonstrating its contributions to society. Fantasy is that to which writers turn to “integrate the various kinds of truth that give man and his universe their sense of meaning” (Hume, 1984: 50) and that which can subvert, through its alteration of “the relations of the imaginary and the symbolic”, the status quo and lead to “radical cultural transformation” (Jackson, 1981: 91). While fantasy has a long history that scholars note has a strong potential for social change, it is nevertheless still dramatically underrepresented in the larger genre critical canon. This lesser degree of attention and critical inquiry can make it seem not only contradictory, but controversial, to propose this form as an approach to trauma. This study intervenes, alongside existing scholarship, to challenge this sentiment to suggest that not only should fantasy be deemed as appropriate in creating new forms of representation of trauma, but also that it can offer unique contributions to individual and collective confrontations of contentious pasts. Further it proposes that critically engaging with the possibilities of fantasy as a traumatic narrative structure addresses some of the difficulties trauma studies faces in terms of its “crisis in representation” (J.Hirsch, 2004: 15).

As will be examined further in the following chapter, scholars have already

recognized the contributions of alternative representations in addressing individual trauma as well as profound historical shifts. Trauma, and its subsequent returns and representations, does not always fit a true/false binary and instead can provide narratives and memories that question previously held concepts of these definitions. Janet Walker, for example, proposes that reading trauma memories from a psychological perspective can provide insight into different ways of remembering, such as misremembering, rerepresenting, amnesia, and fantasy, which add insight into trauma and how historical meaning is formed (2005). In his work on trauma, psychoanalyst Dori Laub similarly argues for appreciating the trauma's unique truth and memories as witnessing trauma requires an approach that acknowledges the distinct truth that these memories offer (1991). In her work on trauma in film, Cathy Caruth also points out that often times traumatic memories are dismissed as false because they appear in alternative, unrecognizable forms, thus necessitating new ways of recognizing truths that would traditionally be considered false (1995, 1996). These important voices in the field of trauma film and literature studies underscore a pervading recognition of the need for new kinds of representation.

Examining trauma debates and the growing demand for, though not necessarily recognition of, alternative representations of trauma leads this study to point to the fantasy genre as a representational form that is problematic and yet at the same time has much potential. As a genre that emblemizes and embraces change, fantasy provides an alternative space to bring together conflicting and unresolved cases of history and confront the many pieces of shattered worlds. This is especially critical in cases such as trauma in which the security of known spaces has been compromised and the spaces that are being created in its stead are still under construction. As a popular, recognized genre, fantasy offers a comforting foundation to this construction process to sort through these transformations in the creation

of new understandings and spaces.

The fantasy genre's intermediate nature and consequential disturbance of recognized world orders is appealing to relating stories of trauma that themselves are troubled by hauntings, disputed memories, and, in some cases, perpetuation of violence that all create a state of irresolution. Examining films from around the world and their representations of individual and collective traumas through fantasy, this thesis shows how fantasy functions to represent and challenge histories of violence, silence, and irresolution. Further it looks at how fantasy itself can be manipulated to further unsettle cases that are not resolved. In exploring the contributions of the fantasy genre to trauma narratives, it contributes to an expanded recognition of a genre that has been understudied and underestimated as well as discussions on how trauma is narrated and negotiated on the road to reconciliation.

## **1.6 Methodology and Case Studies: A Close Reading of Films from Across the World**

In examining the contributions of the fantasy genre to trauma representations and why fantasy is chosen as a genre in trauma films, this study will provide a textual analysis of five selected works. Representing diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds, as well as a selection of fiction and nonfiction films, this distinct group of films allows for a comparison of the underlying themes that arise in trauma studies, as will be examined in the literature review, as well as the appeal of fantasy beyond a particular culture or event. This work will also touch upon how, like fantasy, these films cross borders between worlds. Beyond the screen, these works spark debates about production, reception, and how it influences outside discussions on trauma as well as the confrontation and reconciliation of trauma in societies in which the past still remains unresolved.

The films are examined through close analysis in order to provide a deeper understanding of the complicated manifestations of trauma and the differences as well as deep rooted similarities that arise in different contexts. The close analysis methodology gives room to develop these readings and present a stronger case for connection for films that may, on the surface, appear dissimilar. As each film deals with a very particular history, it is important to give some time and space to that context, yet at the same time these films are also read beyond their context to exemplify some common characteristics of trauma and representation. As such, this work is not meant to be a global survey of all trauma fantasy films as the breadth of this approach would lose the aspects of close analysis emphasized here.

These films were also chosen as they are both examples of the artistry of fantasy as well as the far-reaching success of the genre. Each film selected represents an aesthetic achievement of the art of film and shows a creativity in integrating fantasy and history. For this reason, some films might more clearly appear as fantasy while others might have the fantasy overshadowed by some of the film's other characteristics, or might have warped the fantasy in a way that it is not directly identified as such. This malleability of film and fantasy draws attention to these works as well as the possibilities of film and fantasy. These films thus contribute to this study's purpose of raising questions about the intersection of fantasy representations of trauma and, through a more in-depth examination of key examples from particular trends, starting to unfold some of the possibilities that the fantasy mode offers in approaching trauma.

The films selected here all shed light on shared traumatic themes, yet do so in distinct manners that expose the diversity and depth of fantasy and trauma films. Further, either as individual works or as works that make up a recognized filmmaker's *oeuvre*, they have been

films that have been able to explore these distinctions on a larger scale, reaching audiences and critics beyond one point of origin.<sup>9</sup> These films representing distinct traumas, origins, filmmakers, and cultural situations surrounding the processing of trauma within a given society all point to some of the shared appeals of fantasy that can cross borders. First, these films attract attention for their popularity both publically and academically (the one exception that has not garnered much attention in either area is Michel Khleifi's *Tale of the Lost Jewels* which, despite the prominent position its director holds in Palestinian cinema, is one of his least discussed films). The popularity of these films makes them intriguing subjects as they draw attention to the power of fantasy as a popular genre even when the subject and storyline are focused on trauma. The interest in these films is how, as art films that have won popular appeal and attention, they straddle the divides between auteur/individual, national/collective, and transnational. Though these films have been critically analysed in the media and academia, there is still a lack of evaluation of the generic qualities of fantasy employed in their work, leaving room to academically examine how this aspect contributes to their ability to appeal to audiences familiar and unfamiliar with their history alike.

Another aspect that brings these films together is their treatment of traumas that remain unsettled in society. A more in-depth look at the context of each film will reveal the particularities of the individual histories surrounding the films, but the shared lack of resolution that these films represent makes the examination of the use of fantasy as an unsettled genre intriguing in these cases. Also in terms of these histories, all of the

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<sup>9</sup> Many of these films themselves cannot be tied to one point of origin as they are international co-productions (all except for *The Blondes* have significant foreign investment and support) and in several cases (Michel Khleifi, Rithy Panh, and, in a way, Emir Kusturica), the filmmakers themselves live outside of their place of birth that is the subject of their films.

filmmakers have a strong personal connection to the trauma they are depicting. Emir Kusturica (from former Yugoslavia) and Michel Khleifi (a Palestinian filmmaker born in Israel) both portray stories of the violent breakups of their homelands (Yugoslavia and Palestine, respectively) while in the case of the documentary fantasies they are all subjective stories about each filmmaker's individual experience of trauma. In some of these cases, even the idea of a well-defined homeland is questioned, as will be explored in individual chapters. The intersections here of the personal and historical through film raise the question of what happens when experiences of trauma move beyond the personal into public domain.

These films are also similar in that rather than alluding to history through the allegorical, these works directly address the historical events that inspire the ensuing trauma: *Tale of the Three Jewels* addresses the on-going territorial tension and violence within Israel and Palestine, *Underground* is a story of the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Yugoslavia and the culmination in the violent break-up of the country, *The Blondes* examines the on-going effects of violence in Argentina after undergoing a period of violent repression carried out by its own government, *The Missing Picture* also questions a genocide carried out by Cambodia's own government, and finally *Waltz with Bashir* looks at the effects that Israel's continual wars have on its own soldiers. These histories are all expressly addressed in the films, steering them away from the allegorical which can be of greater appeal as it avoids some of the representational debates by not claiming to directly represent history or trauma. While allegory offers a rich study, as demonstrated by Lowenstein's work on the allegorical moment in horror films of national trauma, this work is instead interested in those representations that offer both clear fantastic narratives as well as explicitly name and narrate the collective trauma that is at the heart of each film. As these fantastic narratives intersect with more traditional ones of the traumatic event, they allow for exploration of the

possibilities that such direct confrontation of narratives creates.

While the films in this study share these characteristics, the works selected represent two distinct strands that will be explored more in depth. The first strand is the fairy tale film, as represented by *Tale of the Three Jewels* and *Underground*, while the other strand is documentary fantasy as seen in *The Blondes*, *The Missing Picture*, and *Waltz with Bashir*. Both fairy tales and documentaries offer extensive, but distinct, chronicles of representing collective histories and issues. The position of historical events in fairy tale films and the fantasy in documentary, however, can be understated and merits a closer look in the case of trauma. What brings these two strands together in this study is the intertwining of history and the imagination in the fantastic that in both cases serves to unsettle not only the recognized strand (fairy tale or documentary) but also the story itself.

Bringing together these diverse strands and case studies contributes to the broader discussions that this thesis pursues. As this study looks to emphasize a more global appeal of fantasy, it does not explore the regional histories of fantasy. Further the driving interest in fantasy leads to cursory accounts of the very real, complicated, and serious acts of individual and collective violence that have prompted these films. This does not look to reduce the gravity of each situation and the respect it merits. The brief introductions to the conflicts discussed here are meant to provide an essential though in no ways overarching background to the violence while highlighting factors that have led to the states of irresolution that are examined in the thesis.

For the purpose of this work it is important to show the in-between state of the real world and the imagined, and for that it is crucial to highlight the influence of fantasy in fiction and nonfiction film. This presents its own set of issues as trying to merge two usually distinct strands of study leaves the work vulnerable to criticism from each camp that their



field is under or misrepresented. The main function of this work is to provide a reflection on fantasy and not a detailed history of fairy tale or documentary films. The literature review chapter highlights brief bits of history that show how each strand relates to trauma or fantasy representation in order to prepare for the more in-depth case studies to follow. The overarching desire to highlight the similar appeal of fantasy across cultures and film styles thus acknowledges and accepts these limitations in its desire to focus on connections.

## **1.7 Chapter Breakdown and Conclusions: Looking Forward**

Reflecting the fairy tale and documentary strands of film, this thesis looks at five case studies, the first two representing fairy tales and the last three being documentaries. To prepare for these case studies, the following chapter provides a literature review of some of the key theoretical concepts explored in this book. Focusing predominantly on ideas of trauma and fantasy, this chapter reviews a brief history and ideas of these fields as it highlights some areas of intersection. Further the chapter explores how these fields interrelate with collective memory as well as their connection to the fairy tale and documentary mode of storytelling, as represented by the two types of film examined in this work.

The following two chapters will look at fairy tale films, *Tale of the Three Jewels* and *Underground*. The fairy tale films selected for this study are at once recognizable for this fantasy subset's characteristic traits yet at the same time subvert the fairy tale. Not only do these films insert historical narratives that come to play a prominent role in the story's development, but they also forestall the fairy tales. As they defy the concluding resolution that gives the fairy tale its desired sense of hope, these tales offer a space to address transitioning elements of history but in the end they do not offer a satisfactory solution for either the characters or history. In these cases, the comforts of the fairy tale are both used and

undermined in situations where the search for the “fairy tale ending” is still undergoing.

The final three case studies focus on films in which the defining strand of the work is nonfiction, *The Blondes*, *The Missing Picture*, and *Waltz with Bashir*. Looking at autobiographical documentary fantasies, the case studies of these films ask how these stories of personal experience combine the authority of documentary with the representational possibilities of fantasy to create stories that at once convey and disturb history. This convergence of seemingly contradictory elements and modes speaks to the complexities of trauma representation and the creative and controversial means employed to create space for the diverse experiences of trauma.

These explorations of fantasy highlight a provocative current situation in which trauma, despite its high exposure in the public eye, still finds itself in a “crisis in representation”. Fantasy, as a genre defined by its confrontation with conflict and quest through the intermediate towards dreamed of and unknown futures, provides an alternative means of representation to look towards a new future for trauma. While not necessarily presenting the hopes of reaching a “happily ever after”, fantasy creates a space to examine the past with an aim of working through the present in order to prepare for the future. In a world of increasingly broken boundaries and blurred borders in which there is a heightened state of transition and constant intermediacy, having this space in-between worlds provides a way to look forward.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

This thesis argues that fantasy as a genre offers not only a suitable, but at times desirable, mode in representing individual as well as collective trauma. While acknowledging that trauma can indeed challenge and cause a “crisis in representation”, this work also looks at how theorists and filmmakers have confronted these challenges and crises and shown that though it might change how the world is viewed, trauma in and of itself does not hide the world from view. Fantasy is presented as a genre with the characteristics and history of being a mode for conveying troubled times of social change that can contribute to furthering discussions of trauma representation and the process of reconciliation.

In framing this work’s exploration of fantasy’s contributions to dialogues of how trauma can be approached, represented, and possibly even worked through, this chapter examines some of the overarching theories imperative in this discussion. It starts by reviewing trauma and fantasy theory and highlighting some of the key themes that bring these two studies together. It then provides more context regarding the two strands of films explored in this study, the fairy tale and the documentary film, and how they exemplify and contribute to the discussion of the previous themes explored. This broad review of these fields will serve to set up the more in-depth looks at how they occur in particular contexts as will be examined in the case studies.

### 2.2 Trauma: Shattering Worlds and Crises in Representation

In the preface to his work *The Drowned and the Saved* about the Nazi concentration camps (1989), Primo Levi describes how the existence and practices of the annihilation camps were simply unbelievable. Levi notes how SS militiamen within the camp taunted prisoners

by saying that even with concrete evidence, the world couldn't and wouldn't believe that these crimes took place because they were unfathomable. The prisoners viewed this pronouncement not as a mere taunt, but the truth: their circumstances were so unbelievable that who in the world would believe their story was true. In his account, Levi describes a situation that overturned preconceived world orders, leaving those who were subject to these unimaginable horrors brought to life in a state of shock and outside witnesses in disbelief. Despite the unique circumstances of the Holocaust, at the basis of Levi's description is a common characteristic of trauma: a shattering of the known world order and the conversion of life from the known and believable into the unbelievable.

In this conversion, trauma takes on some of the characteristics that have defined its theorization since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As expressed by Levi, the overwhelming reaction to violence can be feelings of the unbelievable and unrepresentable. In its initial shock, violence is not always processed in the moment as trauma and its return is belated. These challenges posed by the events leading to trauma also affect its representation. As a result, trauma studies have focused on how representations of trauma can challenge ideas of narration as they are related in a manner that defies temporal linearity and instead presents itself as a fragmented timeline/story (Freud, 1920; Caruth, 1994, 1995; Walker, 2005). These issues in trauma studies still shape and provoke debate in the representations of trauma today.

Trauma's shift from its Greek origins describing the study of physical wounds to the study of first the individual and then the collective psyche in the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> century saw the concept of this experience expand beyond the realm of the visible, believable physical wounds into a territory of the invisible and unbelievable. The drive to uncover and understand the mental wounds resulting from emotionally disturbing events

led first to hypotheses of a new disease, as early popularized by John Erichsen and Paul Oppenheim, but later explanations of the psychological (Leys, 2000: 3). In this last shift, the focus turned to a discovery and narration of the unknown.

Looking to explain the unidentified origins of mental disturbances and their visible symptoms, such luminary figures as Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet made contributions to the study of trauma in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century that still impact how it is viewed today. One such concept is the displacement or dissociation from the actual triggering event. In his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud explored the idea that trauma is not experienced as such at the time of the event but rather becomes trauma in its belated return as a symptom. This is a result of what Freud read as displacement in which the trauma survivor mentally extricates himself from the moment of the traumatic event as a form of protection. This displacement creates a lacuna in the memory of the trauma, which the survivor is not able to fully process and narrate as a past event. As a result, the trauma survivor experiences the repetition compulsion, or the eternal return, of haunting memories.

These ideas of mental dissociation at the time of events and the return of trauma in various forms can be seen in contemporary descriptions of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980, PTSD has become a common term that has moved beyond the psychiatric practice to describe a variety of events and their afterlife. In her book *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Ruth Leys describes the root of PTSD as being “fundamentally a disorder of memory” in which, because of dissociation, the survivor is not able to process the memory and becomes haunted by it (2000: 2). As such,

The experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented as

past, but is perpetually re-experienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present. All the symptoms characteristic of PTSD—flashbacks, nightmares and other re-experiences, emotional numbing, depression, guilt, autonomic arousal, explosive violence or tendency to hyper vigilance—are thought to be the result of this fundamental mental dissociation...(2002: 2).

In the cases of PTSD, trauma also becomes a belated and lingering return that can haunt through several forms.

Though manifesting in symptoms as described by Leys, another common characteristic that has grown out of the psychoanalytical approach is trauma's troubles with representation. Trauma returns in nonlinear and fragmented forms, leaving the survivor with difficulties in narrating and processing the events into consciousness. Pierre Janet, another early contributor to the psychoanalytical perspective of trauma, was thus fascinated with the process of representation and reintegration. In looking to treat trauma, Janet advocated converting "traumatic memory", an unconscious repetition of the past, into "narrative memory" which chronicles the past as past (Janet, 1919). In this approach, the therapist's goal was to help the patient convert these memories by having him recount his history.<sup>10</sup> To aid in reaching and recounting difficult narratives, doctors such as Janet, Freud, and modern practitioners following in their footsteps often rely on accessing non-linear memories of the trauma, which could be taken from the patients' fantasies or dreams.

The aspects of trauma as they appear in what would be viewed as a fantasy based form have been recognized elements in both the manifestation and treatment of trauma from its psychoanalytical origins into present day discussions and representations. What these characteristics point to is trauma's defiance of the linear or recognized orders and its position in and reliance on the alternative timelines and storylines to express and work

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<sup>10</sup> Leys also notes that despite his emphasis on narrating the past, Janet also at different points in his career advocated forgetting as a cure to the effects of trauma memory (2002: 106-116).

through that which itself is somehow ungrounded. The psychoanalytical approach to individual trauma thus exhibits an understanding and application that foregrounds the discussion of the fantasy genre in this field.

The growth of the field of individual trauma studies, especially in relation to the world shattering events that often elicited these studies, led to increased recognition that these experiences and their effects were felt on a larger scale as well. Provoked by the 20<sup>th</sup> century's grappling with the impact of modernity and the unimaginable horrors of WWI, and the quickly succeeding and even more unimaginable trauma of WWII, studies of collective trauma also flourished. Trauma as experienced on a mass or group level began to be discussed following World War I, but it was not until World War II that collective trauma was treated among civilian populations.<sup>11</sup> In this transition between viewing trauma as that experienced by an individual to acknowledging that it could have collective origins as well as affects, questions arose as to whether or not that which was to be viewed as "massive trauma" was not just a compiling of individual traumas (Robben and Suárez-Orozco, 2000: 24). In recognizing it as trauma as shared by a collective or cultural group, it was necessary to recognize that "the social tissue of a community can be damaged in ways similar to the tissues of mind and body" (Kai Erickson, cited in Robben and Suárez-Orozco, 2000: 24) and that this damage can lead to "collective traumatic memory"(24) with the collective traumatic remembrances "reproduced through ritual commemorations,

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<sup>11</sup> The first psychoanalytic study of terror and torture in the camps was written by Bruno Bettelheim in 1943: 'Individual and Mass Behaviour in Extreme Situations'. In this work he developed his notions of 'survivor's guilt' and 'identification with the aggressor'(Robben and Suárez-Orozco, 2000: 17). Though his arguments face criticism for making generalizations about camp experiences that were not representative of extermination camps and that it was not the mimesis of camp guards that helped camp victims survive, his work is important in that he focused "on the complex social dynamics between perpetrators and victims of violence, instead of restricting explanations of psychopathologies to intra-psychic processes" (Robben and Suárez-Orozco, 2000: 17). Bettelheim, who worked as a psychologist after the war, would go on to write an influential work on fairytales and how they help children cope with traumatic transition.

monuments, testimonial narratives, historical studies, and even bodily practices” (Paul Connerton, cited in Robben and Suárez-Orozco, 2000: 24). As these approaches to conceptions of collective traumas developed, what started as having a basis in individual oriented psychoanalytical understandings of trauma expanded to include more anthropological and sociological perspectives that examined the larger socio-cultural context.

The importance of social and cultural ties thus also became important in how collective trauma was, as Connerton points out, performed by a collective and integrated into and processed through a larger collective memory. Like individual trauma, collective trauma also is not recognized as such at the time of a particular event but is rather that which comes later. Sociological studies of collective memory thus carry over in the field of collective trauma studies. Collective memory as that which is shaped in a given time, place, and culture and then transmitted through social frameworks, as articulated by Maurice Halbwachs in his influential works *La topographie légendaire des évangiles en terre sainte: Etude de mémoire collective* (1941) and *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1952) (combined and translated in the English language volume *On Collective Memory* (Coser, 1992)), is a constructed manifestation of the belated. In this belated and processed return, collective memories have the chance to become narrated as trauma even if they were not initially felt as such at the time of the event.

This sociological perspective on memory is furthered in the development of collective memory studies that come to emphasize and further dissect these social frameworks. Noting Halbwachs’ lack of analysis on how memories are transmitted between people, Paul Connerton attempts to fill this gap by studying how societies remember and pass on collective memories, a transmission that often finds itself rooted in the material culture. While exploring



national rituals and monuments he also highlights how memories are shared via social traditions in practices and material culture ranging from dress to the body itself (1989). The use of national rituals and monuments is also recognizably advanced through the work of Pierre Nora. Using examples from French history, Nora presents the idea of *les lieux de mémoire*, or “sites of memory”, and how a more cohesive French memory, as opposed to individual memories, is created through rituals, monuments, and other “sites of memory” (Nora, 1996). Connerton’s and Nora’s studies thus reinforce both the performance and materiality of collective memories that are memorialized and performed by social groups.

The emphasis on society’s performances and its material culture production of memory can be seen in the replacement of the term “collective memory” with more societal oriented terms such as “cultural memory”, “national memory”, and “historical memory” that highlight the cultural influences and identity politics involved in shaping these memories. The discourses on cultural memory provide diverse points of exploration, namely how memory shapes cultural identity and the societal implications this carries. Marita Sturken’s use of the term “cultural memory” in her work on American memory politics underscores how these memories shape cultural identity and which in turn can be used as the basis of political action (1997). This power can be especially important in the politics of identity creation following collective trauma that Sturken investigates in relation to America’s involvement in the Vietnam War and the AIDS epidemic. Following along these lines, Mieke Bal looks at how cultural memory can provide a means to narrating traumatic events so that the present can incorporate the past; emphasizing the importance of cultural memory in the process of cultural healing.

The idea of national identity that Sturken brings up is central to Svetlana Boym’s readings of what she terms “national memory” in her work on nostalgia. Boym proposes that

national memory makes a single historical plot out of everyday memories that form a “coherent and inspiring tale of recovered national identity” (Boym, 2001: 53) which, in turn, can be employed in national politics. Maria Todorova also emphasizes the idea of identity in her explanation of “historical memory” which becomes “one of the ‘objective’ attributes of the ethnic group and the nation, alongside language, territory, state, economy and social structure, as well as culture” (Todorova, 2004: 3). Historical memory, she further, “has been traditionally treated as the repository of ideas about common origins and the past, creating a deep feeling of solidarity (Todorova, 2004: 3). This privileged position is especially powerful in times of dramatic national change and identity transformations.<sup>12</sup> At these points in history, the cultural roots and ability of these collective memories to bring people together serve as a reinforcement of cultural ties in times in which those ties are being threatened.

In this vein of exploring the cultural contexts and constructive process of creating and conveying narratives of the past through collective memories, sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander examines the influences on collective trauma memories in diverse case studies that range from the Holocaust to the massacre at Nanjing to the partition of India and Pakistan. Alexander proposes that representing and labelling an event as a collective trauma is a highly constructed, motivated process that consists of cultural carriers creating narratives that frame events and their aftermath as trauma. While a society may show signs of being affected by large scale violence and profound group changes, for this experience to be viewed as a collective trauma society must go through the “trauma process” in which a new group narrative defining the event as such is created, shared, and becomes a part of a group’s memory (Alexander, 2004, 2012). As Alexander highlights, it is the practices and modes of representation that are key in examining what come to be viewed as traumatic

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<sup>12</sup> In Todorova’s work this is represented by the case study of the Balkans.

experiences.

This takes on a political element as narratives are used to shape particular identities and what and how the past is represented promotes certain groups in struggles for political power. Memory and history, and their creation and re-creation of the past, become political tools especially in cases of collective violence (Hodgkin and Radstone, 2003). As the past is shaped by political motives, history is shown to be “complex and mediated, involving fantasy and wish rather than simple recording of what happens” (Hodgkin and Radstone, 2003: 6). History’s entanglement with memory can give rise to political gains or protest for political change especially if, as Sturken suggests, “memory is redefined as a social and individual practice that integrates elements of remembrance, fantasy and invention” thus allowing it to “shift from the problematic role of standing for the truth to a new role as an active, engaging practice of creating meaning” (1997: 259). In times of collective turmoil and suffering, the creation of narratives can also contribute to the process of cultural healing (Bal, 1999). Paramount to both individual and collective studies of trauma, then, is the search for and recognition of modes of expression and representation that can aid in the understanding of trauma and its path towards personal, social, and historical recovery.

Though trauma itself refers to the unfathomable that defies logic and societal order, when it comes to representing trauma then the idea of the unbelievable falls subject to interrogation. Representations of these unbelievable acts are asked to look for something believable in them, though no matter how much proof is amassed these acts remain as beyond belief. The process of representing and reconciling trauma as such results in a paradoxical process that wavers between unindexical stories, troubled memories, and collective constructions that, while not making the experience any less real, do bring it

under scrutiny when it is shared.

This sharing, and the questions it brings, is seen in the act of bearing witness to trauma. Literary scholar Shoshana Felman and psychoanalyst Dori Laub's work *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992) presents some of these issues in individual and societal cases. In their alternate readings of the aftermath of violence in their respective fields, their essays highlight the

“question of the witness, and of witnessing, as nonhabitual, estranged *conceptual prisms* through which we attempt to apprehend—and to make tangible to the imagination—the ways in which our cultural frames of reference and our pre-existing categories which delimit and determine our perception of reality have failed, essentially, both to contain, and to account for, the scale of what has happened in contemporary history” (1992: xv).

What they see as a “crisis in witnessing” is related to the crisis of losing world order and understanding as well as the ways to express this loss while still being believed. The act of witnessing, as a shared act between a survivor-witness and the listener-witness, becomes not just a space for the survivor to share, but a creative space in which the listener is also an active participant who must believe in the events and experiences being related.

Shortly after Felman and Laub's work regarding the written and spoken word, literary scholar Cathy Caruth began to explore the contributions of cinema to trauma studies. In her edited volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), including contributions from Felman and Laub, and subsequent manuscript *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth further popularized the use of the psychoanalytical approach in reading cultural texts on trauma and continues to have substantial influence on the field even twenty years later. Caruth's readings emphasize the idea of the belated manifestation of trauma and its inability to be represented in a linear fashion, instead proposing the fragmentary modern aesthetics of flashbacks, disruptions, dreams, and nonlinear development as a way to express these memories. The films she

studies, such as *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959), include these elements and show how through cinema several of the psychoanalytical traits of trauma can be depicted and brought to life. The creation of an alternative space that can represent these challenges as well cinema's ability to connect to the collective makes film an appealing media to confront trauma.

The trouble with expressing trauma and the ensuing "crisis of representation" also inspired a school of film scholars who, like Caruth, saw the potentials of film and screen media as offering new alternatives to approaching these issues. The debate about how film and trauma theory could be combined was articulated in the 2001 special edition of *Screen* "Trauma and Screen Studies". Here editor Susannah Radstone emphasized the unique contributions of cinema and film studies to trauma studies and called for further advancement of the study of trauma onscreen. Radstone's intervention came at a time when she saw a boom in trauma screen studies that, instead of creating its own criteria, was becoming bogged down in ideas of unrepresentability as emphasized by literary scholars like Felman and Caruth and trauma theory's "insistence on dissociation" (2001: 191) that all suggested limited representation and passive spectators. In light of this, Radstone saw the question as "can fantasy's significance be retained in the context of trauma theory's insistence on dissociation and the closing-down of the traumatized mind's capacity for association?", the answer to which will depend on which "trauma theory" comes to influence screen studies (2001: 191). Looking forward, Radstone argued to reclaim film theory from these trauma debates by creating a new approach that proposed a theory that acknowledged trauma theory while not losing film theory's insight into spectatorship, mediation, and fantasy.

The contributors to this issue and the studies it inspired present a vibrant debate about

how to represent trauma. While demonstrating remnants of psychoanalytical trauma theory, these new views of representational possibilities also began to investigate screen media's particular abilities in expressing trauma through the use of other aesthetic modes and genres. Janet Walker's work on the paradoxes of trauma cinema that appeared in the issue and culminated in her book *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust* (2005) emphasizes these two trends. She poses the difficulties of trauma representation as influenced by the psychoanalytical readings of trauma as something that shatters the world and the traditional recourse to memory. When it comes to representation, this leads to what Walker describes as the "traumatic paradox" or the frustrations of history being written with transient evidence as "traumatic events can and do produce the very amnesias and mistakes in memory that are generally considered to undermine the legitimacy of a retrospective report about a remembered incident" (2005: 4). This paradox inspires diverse and controversial representations through dreams, fantasies, re-enactments and other non-realist modes. Though these modes might inspire debate, Walker argues that they do not lead to "unrepresentability" per se, but instead make it "unrepresentable *in the realist mode*" (2005: 21) and thus force examinations and acceptance of new forms of representation. Echoing the *Screen* issue, she adds that new approaches to these themes in audio-visual culture can lead to new ways of addressing the subject's complexities.

E. Ann Kaplan, another contributor to the *Screen* issue, also went on to further explore trauma studies' intersections with cinema and the challenges it poses. In *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations* (2004, co-edited with Ban Wang), Kaplan and Wang state that in the debate over representation a choice must be made between "inadequate telling and relegating of trauma to a mystified silence" (12). In the debate over representation, their argument asserts that though the representations may not be perfect

they are necessary as what trauma leaves is a “need to bestow a new form— narrative or image—upon the obscure traumatized state through imaging” (2004: 2). Within this quest the “socio-historical imagination” provides “the capacity for self-imaging and consequently for creating new sets of objects in the world” and thus the capacity for laying the groundwork for the new worlds that need to come in the wake of shattered ones (2004: 13).

In this shift to contemplating how trauma is represented on screen and shared with an audience, there is also a shift in thinking about how trauma is presented in collective terms as well. Studies of collective trauma investigate not only how a group is affected and traumatized by collective violence, but also how and by whom the narratives of this trauma are created and for what purpose (Alexander, Sturken, Todorova). In terms of cinema, these questions lead to public scrutiny of who is creating accounts of trauma, how, and why. Debates over who should be creating these accounts and the appropriate manner in which they should be doing so also become a large part of discussions of films depicting trauma and tend to frame what is valued and what is disregarded in terms of different modes of expression.

This can be seen in the genre debates regarding collective trauma. Joshua Hirsch has noted how in studies of the Holocaust there is at once a “crisis of representation” (2004: 15) while also an “aesthetic prejudice” (5) in the field. He shows this as being exemplified by Elie Wiesel’s dismissal of the popular series *Holocaust* (Marvin Chomsky, 1978), a critique rooted in “the supposed incompatibility of the Holocaust as a ‘high’ theme and melodrama as a ‘low’ genre” (2004: 5). Aesthetic prejudices lead to questions of appropriateness and can lead to debates over form, as seen in relation to the publication of the Holocaust graphic novel *Maus* (Art Spiegelman, 1980), or in creating a hierarchy of

the best forms of representation. In her article “*Schindler’s List* is Not *Shoah*: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory” (1996), Miriam Hansen addresses the dismissal of the drama *Schindler’s List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) in favour of lauding the documentary *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985) as an oversight of the different yet also important contributions of the popular drama genre. As some forms are deemed more appropriate than others, representations and the stories they tell are overlooked or lost in what becomes a collectively curated narration of an event.

In the debates over representation, there have been certain forms that have been underestimated and understudied. While there are some genres or modes, such as war or documentaries, that have been recognized as more appropriate for trauma representations, other genres, such as horror or fantasy, have been precluded from strong critical analysis. These debates, however, have been enriched as scholars look to expose and defend various forms of representation.

The psychoanalytical understandings of trauma have led some scholars, such as Janet Walker and Cathy Caruth, to advocate for creating a space in film for the dreams and disruptive memories that underlie trauma. Scholars have also expanded the representation debate to include genre studies. In her *Screen* article “Melodrama, Cinema, and Trauma” and subsequent works, E. Ann Kaplan examines melodrama’s contributions to trauma studies. Adam Lowenstein has also taken a “low” or “inappropriate” genre and argued for its place in cultural history as a way to convey collective trauma. In *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (2005), Lowenstein argues that trauma requires an alternative, or “shocking” representation that challenges previous concepts of the world and its understanding. This can be found in the “allegorical moment” exhibited in generic films previously not considered in trauma



studies, such as popular horror films. It is departures like Lowenstein's and its evocation to cover new terrain in terms of the intersection between traumatic and generic narratives that inspire this study and its examination of the popular fantasy genre in cases of trauma representation.

This study takes trauma as the process of confronting the shattering of known world orders and the "crisis in representation" this evokes. As such, the question is less about what happened, but rather the interrogation of the experience of that aftermath of an act of violence and how, through internal confrontation and external recognition, a transition is undergone and new lives and worlds are created. In this process, the continually lived experience of trauma haunts the present not only in its unsettled return, but also in its challenges of representation and reconciliation. While the very defiance of trauma seems to encourage alternative representations that explore all means possible to convey and confront that which itself is unimaginable, the seriousness and sensitivity of the subject limits these representations that can at once be sought and stifled. In this paradox, the search for space to open up and discuss these issues is still at a premium. Within this quest, however, is a concerted effort to highlight and explore psychological and cinematic practitioners who are creating and sharing these avenues of exploration.

One way is the use of varying genres in telling tales of trauma. Genre can provoke an insightful and challenging approach to unresolved histories. It facilitates representation by providing a defined framework. Further, the recognizable conventions and social history of genre can also provide unique contributions to situating and inscribing real life events such as cultural trauma into the societal framework. The fantasy genre, in its many incarnations, offers a rich history of social reflection through recognized narratives that lead to a confrontation, rather than escape, with contested realities.

### 2.3 Fantasy: Exploring Intermediate Worlds

Fantasy is the territory of the unfamiliar. Not exactly unknown, it takes the recognizable and disturbs it, creating a chance to re-approach and re-evaluate that which was thought to be known but is no longer the same. In this world order, the only certainty is the process of change that suspends and carries the characters, storytellers, and audience through transitions. Like the genre itself, studies of fantasy are also a journey into the unfamiliar. The genre's broad definitions and disparate examinations,<sup>13</sup> while showing that there is a general interest in fantasy, also underscore how fantasy has not managed to coalesce a strong central field of study. Equally open to change, the studies of this genre are also in a position of exploration as they look for that which is yet to come.

While individual fantasies (individual dreams and imaginings and reinterpretations of the world) have been used in psychoanalytical trauma studies, an approach followed in trauma film studies starting back with Freud and Janet, the use of the fantasy genre in film is still under investigated. In recent years there has been an increase in works addressing fantasy, though in comparison to other studies of genre fantasy is still and continues to be under represented. In their introductions to fantasy film studies, David Butler *Fantasy Cinema: Impossible Worlds on Screen* (2009), Katharine A. Fowkes *The Fantasy Film* (2010), and James Walters *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction* (2011) undertake to defend the study of fantasy against its slighted position while filling in the rich history of fantasy in

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<sup>13</sup> The theoretical basis for the study of fantasy in film studies comes from literary studies in which scholars have contributed their own broad definitions. For example, Tzvetan Todorov defines fantasy as that which expresses a state of "hesitancy" (1975), Rosemary Jackson takes fantasy as a "mode" (1981), Kathryn Hume defines it as one of two "impulses" in literature (fantasy and mimesis) in which the fantasy is "any departure from consensus reality" (1984: 21), and Brian Attebery takes fantasy as a "genre", though points out that fantasy can and has been taken as representing a spectrum ranging from a "popular escapist literature" with stock elements to a "sophisticated mode of storytelling" that defies the predictable (1992).

film. Ranging from the beginning of cinema and the works of Georges Méliès to the 21<sup>st</sup> century commercial dominance of the fantasy blockbuster, fantasy production has boomed whilst the acknowledgement and study of fantasy is often overshadowed by the challenges in the understanding and defining of this genre. Providing a springboard to the study of fantasy films, these works examine some of the critical issues regarding fantasy that both hinder and demand the greater study of fantasy in film and its particular social contributions.

Though there are continual efforts to address the popular fascination with fantasy, the study of this genre, especially in the context of such emotive issues as trauma, is hindered by the very characteristics that make it appealing. The difficulty of defining fantasy and the broad range of its uses makes it hard to mount a critical canon of fantasy studies. Fantasy is an exceptionally inclusive term. Literary scholar Rosemary Jackson offers that the meaning of the word ‘fantastic’, deriving from the Latin *phantasticus* (imaginary, visionary) and the Greek φαίνω (to make visible), as “that which is made visible, visionary, unreal” (1981: 13). This term is so broad that it encompasses almost all literary or cinematic works that, as the realization of some person or team’s vision, can fit this definition.

Beyond the definition itself, fantasy represents a broad range of concepts in its study. Literary scholar Brian Attebery opens his book *Strategies of Fantasy* with two descriptions that highlight this range, describing fantasy either as a “popular escapist literature that combines stock characters and devices...into a predictable plot” or a “sophisticated mode of storytelling characterized by stylistic playfulness, self- reflexivity, and a subversive treatment of established orders of society and thought” (1992: 1). Both characterizations are equally valid, and yet create a situation in which the term is so broad that it “threatens to become meaningless” (1). This makes fantasy hard to define and study both in general

and critical terms which, rather than opening up the study, can at times limit its use.

In searching for something “in-between” the vastness of mode and triviality of formula, which, ironically, limits the study of fantasy by being too big, Attebery finds the most productive approach to fantasy to be genre (2). Even when approached under genre studies, however, fantasy encounters problems of classification. Works that clearly display and are shaped by fantastic elements are still classified under more easily labelled and studied genres, leaving fantasy often times not even represented. David Butler points out that while fantasy is often mentioned as a genre by the film industry, it is not as widely embraced by the academic community and has either been ignored or hardly mentioned by prominent genre studies authors such as Rick Altman (1999), Barry Keith Grant (2007), Steve Neale (2000), and Wheeler Winston Dixon (2000) (Butler, 2010: 18). Suppressing or dismissing fantasy as its own genre not only limits its study but fails to recognize the unique characteristics of fantasy, with its own genre expectations and connotations.

Fantasy’s categorization as non-realist or escapist, which often comes as a dismissal, has influenced a history of prejudice against the study of fantasy. This stigma has developed over the years, from Plato and Aristotle’s condemnation of fantasy, an approach reinforced by the church, to the Enlightenment’s emphasis on realist representation modes that continues to hold influence (Hume, 1984).<sup>14</sup> In these dismissals, fantasy was seen as offering a dangerous escape into other worlds by fleeing from the realities of this one and pacifying audiences rather than provoking debates and contributing to an understanding of reality. As such, fantasy works were often denied serious study, especially in relation to social problems. This hesitancy to take up fantasy studies impedes the development of a

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<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed account of the different conceptions and rejections of fantasy throughout history, see Part I of Hume’s work *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (1984).

cohesive critical history of fantasy as well as apathy towards implementing new historical approaches.

Despite these prejudices and lack of a strong critical canon, the popularity of fantasy remains and continues to offer appeal to works ranging from popular blockbusters to art house fare and subjects of the frivolous as well as serious. When examined as a genre, fantasy can be seen to provide several characteristics that could appeal to the process of creating a trauma narrative. Fantasy's state of intermediacy, its history of subversion, and its ability to capture the state of unsettlement and transitions all contribute to trauma representations.

These states are captured in Tzvetan Todorov's approaches to fantasy. In his critical work *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973), Todorov not only helped define fantasy but inspired serious critical engagement and studies of a form of literature previously dismissed. Todorov approaches fantasy as a state of uncertainty when the familiar is disturbed. He describes fantasy as stemming from "an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world" in which "the person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us" (1973:25). These circumstances lead to a state of fantasy, in which "the fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (1973:25). Todorov's definition of fantasy as the uncertainty or hesitation that occurs when a person

familiar only with the world governed according to the rules of nature encounters something that transgresses these rules thus highlights the unsettled feeling and intermediacy paramount to fantasy.

Todorov furthers his definition by outlining three conditions for fantasy:

First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work—in the case of naïve reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as 'poetic' interpretations. (1973: 33)

Of these conditions, he clarifies that the first and third are the most important and that fantasy does not necessarily need to meet all three but generally does so. These conditions highlight another important aspect of fantasy: that the reader (or, in terms of film, viewer) also experiences this hesitation. Todorov's definition highlights a key aspect of fantasy that makes it attractive to trauma representations: fantasy occupies a troubled position between worlds.

In this in-between state, fantasy is seen not as escapist but as inexorably bound with the recognized world. Rather than leaving this world, fantasy is an encounter with the recognized world made unfamiliar or, in other words, a transition from the comfort of the *Heimlich* (familiar, belonging to the home) into the discomfort of the *Unheimlich* (unfamiliar, uncanny). Rosemary Jackson proposes that "to introduce the fantastic is to replace familiarity, comfort, *das Heimlich*, with estrangement, unease, the uncanny" (1981: 179). In his essay on the *Unheimlich* (originally published in 1919; 2003), Freud examines the complexities of this sense that transgresses and disturbs the familiar and homely. Though Freud presents a complicated diagnosis of the suitability of fantasy to represent the

uncanny, using E.T.A Hoffman's fantastic stories as his key examples of the *Unheimlich* yet precluding fairy tales, the evocation of this unfamiliar space is uncannily suited to the fantastic mode. The *Unheimlich* is the result of a shift in meaning in the *Heimlich*, which is rendered as something strange through a certain event. The two states are forever tied to one another as they both rely on the *Heimlich* as a starting point (2003). Thus, rather than a complete departure from the world of the familiar, it is an in-between space in which the familiar is unsettled yet never entirely left. Fantasy (and even fairy tales), as a mode itself in-between the worlds of the recognized and familiar and wholly new worlds of the imaginary, creates a space to explore the trauma of the rendering of unfamiliar worlds.

This recognition of the disturbance of the familiar when it is portrayed in a new light is the attribute that defines fantasy and lends it one of its other appealing functions: to act as a narrative of critique or subversion. Following in the footsteps of Todorov, literary scholars Rosemary Jackson and Kathryn Hume have expanded upon his readings and connected fantasy to its real-world effects, emphasizing fantasy's ability to either support or subvert social norms. In *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (1984), Hume points to how the sense of disturbance at the root of fantasy helps question automatic responses to the known, push the boundaries of social practices, and, through visions of another world animated by fantasy, force the reader or viewer to reflect and even act upon these new views of his or her world. Jackson, in focusing more on the genre's links to the psychoanalytical studies of fantasy in her work *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981), looks at how fantasy subverts societal conventions by representing desire. As rules of society lay in the unconscious, its representation exposes the limits of social order in a subversive manner. Along these lines, Butler and Walters also emphasize fantasy's effects on inspiring social engagement and possible change.

Still connected to the inhabited world, the escapism that fantasy does offer is the ability to evade troubled circumstances and dream of new futures. In his defense of fantasy, J.R.R Tolkien reclaims the word “escapist” by arguing that at times escape, or the hope of escape, from grim realities is necessary. As such, fantasy’s ability to provide access to this route is positive and should be embraced rather than dismissed (Tolkien, 1964). Fantasy scholars’ echo this embrace of escapism as that which is both connected to reality and subversive by emphasizing fantasy’s abilities to depose the disturbing aspects of the real world and allow for a dream of “alternative worlds” (Walters, 2011).

These qualities of intermediacy and subversion highlight fantasy’s qualities of reflecting and creating worlds that are unsettled. Part of this is due to the disturbance of the familiar world while the other part can be seen as a result of fantasy’s instigation and portrayal of transition between worlds. In this study, fantasy will be taken, following Katherine Fowkes, as a recognition of the ““ontological rupture”” between worlds in which the audience sees a division between ““reality’ and the fantastic phenomena that define the narrative world” (2010: 5). Further in this rupture they must recognize elements of what is regarded as fantasy and as part of the fantasy genre. The genre qualities that will be focused on are fantasy as a narrative conveying journeys of transition and the place in-between worlds where these occur. Highlighting these genre aspects of fantasy, this thesis looks at how fantasy in trauma representations allows for an approach of that which is unsettled, enables questioning and subversions of dominant narratives or silences, and provides a way to confront and possibly even ease the transition process provoked by violence and its subsequent trauma.

In exploring these themes of the fantasy genre and trauma, this thesis examines films that intertwine fantasy and history, emphasizing the in-between nature of fantasy as that



which is not wholly departed from the real/historical world but instead an event or moment that hesitates between the recognized world and that which is wholly departed from it. In doing so, this work highlights two different strands of films that approach fantasy in a distinct manner. The first is the fairy tale film that uses this specific structure of fantasy in terms of its use of conveying transitions as well as its history in society to develop these themes. The second looks at films that are classified as documentaries and thus are clearly grounded in the nonfiction despite heavy reliance on fantasy. While both strands overall point to the themes of this work and support the argument of fantasy as a genre with distinct contributions to trauma, each presents its own history and contributions to the argument that will be explored in this last section of the literature review. Though both strands are separated here, their inclusion together in this thesis and similarities as presented highlight the diversity of the ways that fantasy can be presented and used in trauma representations.

## **2.4 Two Strands: Forestalled Fairy Tales and Fantasies in Witnessing**

In examining these intersections of trauma and fantasy, this thesis looks at two types of films: the fairy tale film and the documentary film. While all the films studied here rely heavily on fantasy in representing and expressing trauma, their affiliation with these two strands affects how the film is created, presented, and received. The last section of this literature review will subsequently provide a brief background on both fairy tale's and documentary's relation to representing history, thus foregrounding some of the uses and conflicts that representing trauma and fantasy through these forms present.

*Tale of the Three Jewels* and *Underground* are at once stories of real conflicts and their devastating effects that were occurring at the time of filming, and yet are also fairy tales. The choice to convert something very painful in the here and now to a tale of long ago and far

away and its social implications is explored in this section through a literature review of fairy tales that, through its study of the history of this format, suggests that there is good reason for these directors to choose this storytelling form to relate tales of social upheaval.

The fairy tale, a subset of the fantasy genre, has historically been used to address and aid in transitions undertaken in periods of individual and social change. Its own themes of transitions, its space between worlds, as well as its messages of hope are some of the characteristics that have made this particular narrative appealing for telling tales of transformation and addressing the trauma that can result from violent changes. *Tale of the Three Jewels* and *Underground*, stand as part of this history as they use this appeal of the fairy tale in relating historical trauma. They also represent examples that revise the recognized fairy tale structure, refusing the fairy tale's now popularly recognized "happily ever after" ending and leaving the journeys open and unfinished. In these cases, the weaving of historical narratives of violence into the fairy tale hinder the protagonists' journeys and lead to a forestalled fairy tale. The use of the fairy tale in presenting territorial wars and their haunting legacies thus both facilitates the representation of stories in transition and yet frustrates them. This, in turn, leads to discussion of those events in which continued violence, silenced narratives, and one-sided official cultural memory prevent historical and fictional resolutions. In their reliance on and defiance of this mode, the films examined in this study challenge the narration of history by creating space for new dialogues and viewpoints in these contentious pasts.

Fairy tales are used in times of uncertainty as they provide a comforting familiarity and structure to guide through worlds that are unfamiliar and ahistorical. The magical opening words "Once upon a time...", followed by the tales of fairies, mysterious creatures, and princesses and princes who undertake dangerous quests that lead to

transformations and the hopeful promise of a “happily ever after”, are the signals that alert of a strange yet familiar world. The two fairy tale films examined in this work, *Tale of the Three Jewels* and *Underground*, use the fairy tale’s familiarity and its history in order to guide a story that is happening in the midst of a violent societal transition in which everything seems to be changing and nothing seems stable. To this, the fairy tale provides “persistent thematic and structural uniformity” (Tatar, 1981: 75) that both add structure to history but also provides a recognizable structure to fantasy. The basic structure in the fairy tale is the quest in which, encountering a problem at home, the protagonist leaves on a journey and along the way encounters some of several reoccurring elements and characters, as meticulously catalogued by Vladimir Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale* (first published in 1928), that help and challenge the protagonist and lead to a final transformation. This structure ties into the fairy tale’s perennial themes of transformations and transitions that define its stories.

These themes also define the other recognizable dimension of these tales: their world. Leaving the familiar realms of the home, which is also recognizable to the audience as it more resembles the real world, the protagonist enters a magical realm in which previously followed rules of the real world are broken. In her short history of the fairy tale, literary scholar Marina Warner describes the fairy tale world as one in which magic “conjures the presence of another world” or, citing W.H. Auden, J.R.R. Tolkien, and C.S. Lewis, a ““Secondary World”” (Warner, 2014: 4). Though it resembles the other world, things are done differently here; there are new rules, new characters, and new situations that are not expected in the ordinary world and, while not wholly different from it, mark a departure from the past world. This secondary space also resembles Freud’s elaboration of the *Unheimlich* as explored in the previous section. The world of the *Unheimlich*, much like

that of fairy tales and even trauma, carries characteristics of the real and recognized world and yet undergoes a change in which these come to resemble something different and uncanny. The fairy tale's sojourns into the unfamiliar thus make it an ideal place to challenge familiarity and represent its overthrow as occurs in times of transitions and trauma.

In treating these difficult periods of change, the fairy tale does not just reflect struggle but also offers hope that the struggles can be overcome and that life can offer if not a fairy tale ending, at least happier circumstances. While this hope can be dismissed as false, or even decried as dangerous and negatively escapist, J.R.R. Tolkien defends the fairy tale against these accusations by pointing out that this hope is the most important aspect of the tale (1964). The fairy tale teaches that there is nothing wrong with dreaming of a better life as the world is not an ideal place and often these dreams are all that is to be had. A recurring lesson of the fairy tale thus is that hope can be offered by dreaming of a better world.

At once constant, these characteristics of passages and other worlds also allow for flexibility as they themselves represent the transitional and intermediate. Further the space of the fairy tale is one that inspires transformation as it brings together opposing worlds and elements that creates new identities and meanings for the once familiar. The fairy tale's transformational journeys as well as an atmosphere of uneasy uncertainty created as protagonists navigate an intermediate realm offer a constant yet unsettling narrative structure. Along the way, the protagonists confront the unknown and in the process undergo a transformation that will change them or their position in the world. Thus, the appeal of the fairy tale is not just its familiarity, but also its adaptability as the details within the structure can be changed so as to reflect different transitions as well as cultural and temporal settings.

With this the fairy tale transcends geographical and temporal borders and continues to tell the tales that, taking root within the fairy tale world itself, are placeless and timeless. Marina Warner describes the fairy tale as a story in which “motifs and plotlines are nomadic, travelling the world and the millennia, turning up on parchment in medieval Persia, in an oral form in the Pyrenees, in a ballad sung in the Highlands, in a fairy story in the Caribbean” (1994: xvii). That similar tales appeared across such a wide geographical and temporal range suggest that there is something in fairy tales that holds a broader appeal not tied to a specific time or cultural. The facility to travel across borders is furthered as fairy tales typically do not occur in a specific time and place but themselves have a timeless setting that allows for its adaptability.

The history and place of the fairy tale reflects how this narrative has been used and continues to offer appeal to telling those narratives that are themselves transitional, troubled, and traumatic. With regards to the individual, the fairy tale has been recognized as providing a space of identity negotiation for children transitioning into adulthood and undergoing collective socialization. Though not representing a collective trauma, this period is recognized as one of violence and doubt that on the individual level represents the destruction of known world orders and the painful journey that must be undertaken to restore a sense of identity and order. Bruno Bettelheim, a psychoanalyst and passionate proponent of the importance of fairy tales, elaborates on the psychoanalytical uses of the fairy tale narrative in his *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1976). In this he describes the fairy tale’s function in helping children through transitions into adulthood and finding meaning in their lives. The young reader identifies with the protagonist and his or her quest and through this identification externalizes and works out his or her own transitional issues. For Bettelheim, a fairy tale functions differently than any other

narrative as it provides the child a path to and hope of accessing meaning and identity. Rather than viewing the fairy tale as pure escapism, Bettelheim argues for the psychological benefits of fairy tales that fulfill a serious social purpose.

Fairy tale's historical position further points to how it is a tool to help individuals address changing social circumstances. Despite its otherworldly elements, the fairy tale either allegorically or literally reflects very specific challenges faced in society and offers a way to discuss taboo social issues and provide possible solutions. Marina Warner elaborates on this in *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (1994). Here Warner focuses on how this was especially apparent in representing problems women faced, such as being married to an older stranger who could seem and at times be as terrible as a beast. These issues were reflected not only in the female characters but also often in the lives of the female storytellers. By bringing women together in telling stories of painful social realities that often ended with hope, fairy tales offered lessons in handling difficult situations and the promise that they could be overcome. Looking beyond the individual and group examples offered by Bettelheim and Warner, this work will look at how similar ideas can be applied to collective violence as undergone through events like war or genocide.

The fairy tale was not just a story for women and children but was used to address problems across the community. Beyond the extraordinary, the fairy tale was grounded in the everyday and represented “an effort on the part of both women and men to develop maps for coping with personal anxieties, family conflicts, social fictions, and the myriad frustrations of everyday life” (Tatar cited in Warner, 2014: 114). The history of the fairy tale displays a conscious effort to create a space and process for teaching and working through challenging situations as well as to easing transitions in socialization processes. As it is shared between generations, the fairy tale not only passes on a story, but the cultural

values and lessons instilled in that story. Literary scholar Jack Zipes has extensively catalogued the European spread and development of the fairy tale in its different phases, allowing him to chronicle the social processes to which the most popular storytellers contributed. Zipes highlights the use of fairy tales to socialize in the European context, noting examples ranging from how Charles Perrault's fairy tales contributed to the process of civilization undergone in late 17<sup>th</sup> century France to governess Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's printing of fairy tales to teach her charges (1991). In a similar manner, Ruth Bottigheimer found Jacob and Wilhem Grimm's collections to be heavily edited to espouse particular child-rearing, political, and psychosocial aims that would cultivate a German society to represent and uphold their visions and values for this newly forming nation (1986). In the case of the Grimms, Warner also notes how the heavy editing and sanitization of many of the original stories collected by the brothers, mainly undertaken by Wilhem Grimm, also worked to convey certain social messages and practices (2014). The fairy tale contributes to cultivating and supporting societal practices or, as Zipes also highlights, subverting them in order to create new practices in times of change.

Both in terms of the individual as well as the collective experience, the themes and transitions that these tales address often touch upon taboo issues. The fairy tale, in its fantastic origins, is also a tale that tells of and reflects disturbance and the unresolved or unmentioned. In terms of repressed topics, both in cultural and political terms, the fairy tale can serve as an allegory that through its classic structure can deliver messages unable to be directly addressed. Further in its conveyance of the taboo, the fairy tale can act as a form of subversion, as chronicled by Warner and Zipes that disrupts dominant discourses and uses the fairy tale to offer paths to new ways of being.

In cases of trauma, the fairy tale both serves as a familiar structure to convey stories

of turbulent transitions while also acting as a way to disrupt the repressed or overlooked, though nonetheless haunting, parts of the past. The fairy tale's offering of a structure to tell stories of change counteracts the argument of trauma's unrepresentability. Further it demands new means of representation in a field that has prioritized other representational tactics that fit proscribed genres, such as war or drama, and can possibly lead to a breaking of genre codes. With the fairy tale, it is the genre qualities of this fantasy subset that precisely address the difficulties of trauma representation either through allegories or direct representation of contentious events and ideas.

The other half of this study is made up of documentary films, representing a mode which has its own unique relationship to trauma and fantasy. As documentaries that rely on fantasy to convey their stories of trauma, *The Blondes*, *The Missing Picture*, and *Waltz with Bashir* raise questions as to how this emphasis on fantasy supports and challenges notions of the documentary form. They also explore how personal stories are conveyed through autobiographical documentaries and how this subset within the documentary brings its own questions of representation.

Trauma can cause a crisis in witnessing for individuals and groups. That many aspects of the dramatic changes undergone are such an alarming break from previously known orders that they are simply unbelievable, as well as the delayed processing and variant forms in which trauma can return, can pose difficulties for witnesses to express and listeners to accept their accounts. The responses to these particularities range from imposed or chosen silence to a drive to create a single dominant story to the creation of a narrative that embraces the many manifestations of trauma memory. Questions of representing a history of trauma also come into play, albeit in a slightly different way, in the documentary film.



History has an integral and troubled position in the documentary, as highlighted by Bill Nichols in his statement “what the documentarist cannot fully control is his or her basic subject: history” (1991: 14). While the subject itself might be outside one’s control, the way it is presented is not. Stella Bruzzi argues that “although theoretical orthodoxy stipulates that the ultimate aim of documentary is to find the perfect way of representing the real so that the distinction between the two becomes invisible”, what one instead finds is that the “dialectical relationship between the event and its representation” is “the backbone of documentary filmmaking” (2006: 13-14). Documentary as such is recognized as tied to history, but equally important is the notion that while this type of film is positioned to relate historical events, it does so through its own process of mediation. Fantasy as a particular approach to representation distinctly shapes the documentary space and the accounts it produces. This approach allows for the inclusion of those details that interrupt the linear documentation of trauma while also disrupting the public management of designated discourses. The hybridity of documentary fantasy both serves to articulate the challenges of representing a past obscured and overlooked in history as well as creates a medium to re-insert these missing pictures into historical narratives.<sup>15</sup>

Looking at pasts that continue to be contentious in the present, the protagonists/directors of the documentary fantasies examined here find cases in which documented evidence has been destroyed, witnesses killed, and memories questioned or repressed by individuals and society. In *The Blondes*, *The Missing Picture*, and *Waltz with*

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<sup>15</sup> Janet Walker, most explicitly and thoroughly in her work *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust* (2005), looks at documentaries (many of which are personal memoir documentaries like the ones studied here) and how directors/subjects use fantasy to relate their stories of trauma. In this, her work primarily draws on individual and psychoanalytical concepts of fantasy. While this work is also influenced by the individual and psychoanalytical concepts of fantasy, it also looks to expand this research by focusing on fantasy as a genre.

*Bashir*, not only is there a lack of evidence and witnesses to corroborate these stories, but there are dominant discourses that dictate how and what parts of these histories are shared. This leads to further challenges in representation as events are left unacknowledged or the narratives of particular groups are denied or overshadowed.

Faced with these challenges, the three autobiographical documentaries examined in this thesis present explorations into how to bear witness to individual experiences of trauma that defy the silences or dominant narratives of troubled histories. The result is documentaries that bear witness not only to the past, but to the crisis of witnessing it produces as trauma demands and yet defies the ability to confront, display, and share the past.

Similar to the fairy tale films, in this process the films employ means of representation that demonstrate fluidity between fiction and nonfiction. However, the films' positioning as documentaries inspires a unique set of issues that influences the reading of witnessing and fantasy in these cases that differs from the fairy tale films. This develops from the documentary's ties to the real world and the possibilities documentaries present to be read as a historical text. Despite this positioning in the real, documentary does not necessarily preclude the use of fantasy. Examining the documentary points to these two seemingly juxtaposing but rather interconnected narratives that influence the documentary's take on history and that, as the cases examined here show, make it into a mode to explore the in-between of trauma.

Though it can expand in different directions, the recognized starting point of the documentary is in the nonfiction. Documentary scholar Bill Nichols highlights this by distinguishing the documentary's world of reference as "*the* world" as opposed to "*a* world" (1991). Further filmmakers and theorists pointedly position documentary away

from the realms of fiction. This not only works to define the documentary as based in the real but also bequeaths the documentary with a “moral superiority” that enables it to, in turn, contribute to a historical or social dialogue (Nichols, 1991: 108). Documentary’s claims to the shared historical world instead of invented worlds facilitate its role in performing history. This can lead to, as Nichols later went on to develop, a “performative documentary” (1994). This type of documentary “marks a shift in emphasis from the referential as the dominant feature” (Nichols, 1994: 94) which in turn “blurs yet more dramatically the already imperfect boundary between documentary and fiction” and “makes the viewer rather than the historical world a primary referent. (These films address us, not with commands or imperatives necessarily, but with a sense of emphatic engagement that overshadows their reference to the historical world.)”(1994: 94). Thus, the documentary can mark a shift from presenting the historical/ theworld to performing it, as will be examined in the films here.

This exemplifies the diversity of intervention and the fluidity between fiction and nonfiction within the documentary. As such, documentary can also be a form that is open to and will employ fantasy as a form of expression This expression can be seen in the autobiographical documentary as it creates a space to bear witness to the personal. All three documentaries examined in this work are autobiographical documentaries that represent this intermediacy between fiction and nonfiction and representational forms employed as the films shift from capturing a larger historical context shown through a claimed objective to bearing witness to the filmmaker’s subjectivity. If an important part of documentary is its ability to provide visible evidence, then representing the undocumented subjective makes it so that, as Michael Renov suggests, “the very idea of autobiography challenges the VERY IDEA of documentary” (2008: 41) as it often times relies on the unindexical and uncertain and, as a result, a performance or creative representation of events.

Documentary's claims to objectivity can hinder the progression of those works focusing more on subjective experiences as Alisa Lebow explores in her work *First Person Jewish* (2008). Changing the focus from the objective to the subjective "permanently ruptures the illusion of objectivity so long maintained in documentary practice and reception" (2008: xii). The departure from the "certainty" of objectivity (obtained through the degree of removal offered by a third person witness) to the "uncertainty" of subjectivity (first person witness) challenges the documentary's position as an authoritative discourse as it leads to questions and doubts as to credibility.

Though the uncertainty of subjectivity makes the discourse more open to criticism or negation, this turn to the subjective still offers its own attraction. In cases of violent and traumatic histories, testifying to these experiences can provide survivors of violence a path to, if not full reconciliation, at least recognition. As Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker explore in such contexts, the act of testifying allows a new sense of control over the narrative on the personal level while also re-incorporating that person into a collective. As both Lebow and Renov remind, however, the subjective film as therapy always presents a degree of frustration in what becomes a never finished process as "filmmaking as therapeutic discourse, like analysis, remains interminable, always unfinished" (Renov, 2004: 222). Looking to take back some control of these troubled narratives and express haunted personal experiences that often lack "objective" documentation and can be elusive and contradictory, these individual introspections find new ways to address and perform the uncertain and show that documentary is a space in-between stories and positions.

The films examined here capitalize and expand upon the intermediate aspects of documentary as they witness traumatic history in what becomes a form of documentary fantasy. The introduction of fantasy in the cases of witnessing trauma can both relieve and

exacerbate some of the challenges they present. Janet Walker's "traumatic paradox" notes how trauma defies and undermines its own representation, instead finding representation through the "fantasies, repression, misperceptions, and interpretations" (2005: 7). As such, traumatic defiance of the objective can lead to reliance on the subjective. The fantasies in witnessing that come to testify for these experiences both provide an outlet for representation and expression and yet can also undermine the act of witnessing as the stories and memories upon which trauma representations are built can lead to questions of legitimacy.

The past is, however, made up of multiple experiences and the different ways that they are remembered. In her analysis of the social construction of history in terms of Holocaust memory, Barbie Zelizer notes that in cases of trauma, "bearing witness implies that there is no best way of depicting or thinking about atrocities, but that the very fact of paying heed collectively is crucial" (1998: 10). Propelled by the urge and need to bear witness on an individual and collective level, the past resurfaces in diverse forms that open up the complicated and controversial project of paying heed to traumatic pasts.

Rather than viewing it as a drawback, fantasy's agitation to and in documentary is part of its appeal. By disturbing dominant discourses and accepted notions of the objective version of the story, fantasy actually opens discussion of the multiple and contradictory experiences of a history. It gives space to share diverse stories and, in this, they also disturb the silences and forgetting surrounding certain events by bringing up the perspectives that have been overlooked or deliberately forgotten. By engaging liminal histories, fantasy allows for witnessing of that which has been omitted or suppressed.

The autobiographical documentaries in this thesis are united by their recognition and compulsion of the need to collectively acknowledge the multiple experiences undergone in

times of societal violence. Further their exploration of alternative ways of bringing about this witnessing underscore the creative attempts that can and at times need to be applied to confront disputed pasts and integrate those parts that have been denied. In this vein, the documentary is shown to embrace story telling modes that rely on the in-between and that, rather than offering an “objective”, grand narrative, focus on presenting the multiple experiences of the past.

Looking at how fantasy both contributes to and challenges documentary’s stakes in history, the studies of the three documentary films explore how documentary fantasy is used to bear witness to and create a space for experiences that challenge the past. In the autobiographical documentaries considered here, fantasy is used as a means to address both individual’s traumatic lacunae as well as those in official memories. In *The Blondes* (2003), Albertina Carri’s search for her experience as a child who lost her parents under Argentina’s dictatorship continually confronts a national narrative that doesn’t have space for her story. This leads the film to ask how to carve a space for a particular experience in a society that has already formed a powerful narrative. *The Missing Picture* (2013), on the other hand, shows Rithy Panh’s challenges in bearing witness to a past that offers scant documentation and that for many years has been denied personal and public discourse. Similarly, in *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) Ari Folman struggles with the difficulties of testifying to an experience that has remained suppressed by himself and society. As a journey of the in-between, fantasy allows not only for the confrontation but for the forward moving impetus that provides the hope that in the end there will be some way to come to peace with the past and be able to look towards the future.

By inserting their stories into the discussions that have overlooked these experiences, the films provide a space to bear witness to the individual experience of life shattering events

and their traumatic aftermath. Further they look at how these episodes make up part of larger collective understandings that, in leaving out particular narratives, have remained unresolved. Giving a space to express those experiences that have either defied expression or been denied it, documentary fantasy gives way to new interpretations of the past that can serve to unsettle the dominant narratives (or silences) that have been constructed. In this disturbance it creates openness for questions of the past, and its construction, as well as recognition of the multiple accounts that need to be acknowledged in order for individuals and society to come to term with trauma's legacies.

Building off of these ideas of trauma, fantasy, and documentary and fairy tale modes, the rest of this thesis will be devoted to case studies exploring how these ideas materialize in different contexts. Each case is marked by a particular societal and/or personal context, leading to distinct use of fantasy and subsequent representation of trauma. As will be shown in the case studies, the diverse ways that each film addresses these themes and molds fantasy to their own use contributes to creating a rich picture of how fantasy can be used in representing trauma.

## Chapter 3: *Tale of the Three Jewels: Dreams of a Homeland*

### 3.1 Introduction

The youth in *Tale of the Three Jewels* dream of a future in which they are free to follow their own path, but these futures are forestalled as they grow up in the Gaza Strip in the midst of the land's continued conflict. While the film's fairy tale creates space to envision potential peace and opportunities to come, it is unable to offer a true escape from the region's conflicts that overshadow the story. The fantasy enables the film to reflect on how the area's unresolved violence impedes on the narrative of the youth struggling to create their future.

Youssef (Mohammed Nahnal) is a dreamer. His hopes propel the narrative of *Tale of the Three Jewels*—both the waking alternative realities he creates to escape the harsh conditions of life in the Gaza Strip and the sleeping dreams that finally provide him the path to recover the lost three jewels, though at a great price. Youssef's world that exists between these states is one of fantasy and Youssef, in his journey in search of home and place through this world, is the fairy tale protagonist. Ultimately, however, Youssef's dreams and reality are irreconcilable, making his quest another fairy tale forestalled.

Youssef's context, however, does not allow for his aspirations. The conflict going on around him continually disrupts his dreams, competes for control of the film's narrative, and in the end wins out over his fantasies. As much as the fictional account of this young boy is about the fairy tale quest he hopes to start, it is also about the conditions and contexts of continued violence that impede this tale.

While representing an important space to imagine new possibilities despite surrounding violence, the fairy tale does not offer an escape from but rather a point of



reflection on the region's unresolved violence. *Tale of the Three Jewels* was created during struggles over homes and homelands that revived the past to overwhelm the future. There has been no resolution in the on-going conflict between Israel and Palestine and the fight over not only physical territory but the ability to envision an escape from this past has been negated. In Khleifi's work, both present and future are unresolved; new generations find themselves unable to move forward.

Created in the midst of ongoing violence that overwhelms both present and even dreams of the future, the fairy tale in *Tale of the Three Jewels* is impeded by the narrative of reality. Conflict and uncertainty undermines forward movement in reality and in the fairy tale; the film's fantasy reflects incongruous, unresolved worlds and worldviews, especially in terms of homeland narratives. The juxtaposition of life in the camps under military occupation to the stories of the past and the hopes for the future as well as the disputed claims between Israel and Palestine over who can not only call, but freely live in this territory as home, underlie all movements. The competing narratives in this troubled space stifle dreams of a settled future.

This chapter first introduces questions of how the violent conflicts and competing interpretations of the past that have led to continuous disputes over homelands. It then examines how disputed claims of homes and homelands dictate a story's development as well as its ending in the film space. Questions of identity are key factors explored in relationships with the land; the Palestinian identity, for example, prompts quests but also impedes protagonists. *Tale of the Three Jewels* represents a case in which a fantasy narrative is not able to escape ties to reality, creating a space that even in its dreams is perpetually forestalled by conflict.

### 3.2 Film Synopsis

Youssef lives in a Palestinian camp in Gaza where he spends his days helping his mother, carrying food and messages to his revolutionary brother, catching birds and, when the school is not on strike, going to classes.<sup>16</sup> His life is presented as one of youthful pursuits that are overshadowed and warped by his status as a refugee in a conflict zone. This leads to the sometimes serious tasks he is expected to carry out while his father is imprisoned and his older brother, the greater sense of economic responsibility, and a greater threat to his own safety as he lives in an area where armed Israeli military patrol the streets and shoot down boys not much older than himself and take his family. Despite the gravity of these living conditions, Youssef dreams for a future outside of this world.

In his one place of freedom, the oasis on the beaches, Youssef meets Aida (Hana' Ne'meh), a young Palestinian girl. Though both live in camps, Aida is separated by her more precarious position in a less established camp. She does not attend school with Youssef and is seen instead gathering food in the oasis or carrying out other tasks to help her family. Divided by their social conditions, they are united by their search for freedom and Youssef immediately falls in love with Aida and embarks on a quest to prove himself worthy of her.

Aida, a child herself, weaves an enchanted tale about three lost jewels in South America that the man who wishes to marry her must recover. Youssef's sole mission becomes to find a way to travel to South America to recover the jewels and win Aida's heart. As he sets out to complete this fairy tale quest to prove himself worthy of his true

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<sup>16</sup> The United Nations Relief and Works Agency administers camps and aid for Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip. As of 2016, there were eight recognized Palestinian camps in the Gaza Strip with over half a million occupants. [www.unrwa.org](http://www.unrwa.org). Accessed August 16, 2017.

love, Youssef is blind to the escalating political situation around him. As the spaces in which he and Aida play and dream of the future transform into spaces of revolution where Palestinians not much older than Youssef and Aida confront and are repressed by the Israeli army, the children's dreams are caught in the midst of an uprising. They return to the oasis to talk of their plans and find themselves instead caught in the marches of the Palestinians that demonstrate the escalating tension surrounding them. The escalating violence encroaches upon the safe spaces the children once sought to escape their surroundings.

As all avenues of exit are blocked to him, Youssef comes up with one last attempt to escape the Gaza Strip and its overwhelming tide of history. Youssef hides in a crate of oranges destined for a foreign land and while inside dreams that he has found the lost jewels and thus completed his quest. Upon leaving the crate to find his love, however, Youssef encounters Israeli soldiers who panic and shoot the boy. As his family and friends gather around him, Youssef reveals his dream of having recovered the jewels and his freedom--a prize he has had to pay for with his life.

### **3.3 Contexts: Conflicting Constructs**

*Tale of the Three Jewels* is just as much about Youssef's troubled reality as it is about his dreams. The world that Youssef is born into and in which he undertakes his fairy tale quest is not one of "long ago and far away" but rather one of "right now and right here." The context of his narrative is the fight for a homeland that influences the past, present, and future of the Palestinian collective narrative as this inescapable past perpetuates violence and prevents progress.

At the heart of the region's 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century history are two opposing narratives that lay claim to one homeland. Contradictory interpretations of history that date well

beyond these tumultuous centuries are central to the conflict. The year of 1948 is one such contemporary point of variable interpretation; celebrated each year by Israel as the creation and independence of its homeland, in the Palestinian narrative this year represents *al-Nakba* (the catastrophe) that was the Palestinians' loss of their homeland and the beginning of a state of occupation, refugee status, and exile. These interpretative clashes have physical as much as rhetorical implications, both of which can be seen in Khleifi's short documentary *Ma'loul Tahtafilu bi Damariha* (*Ma'loul Celebrates Its Destruction*, 1984). The film depicts how each year on *al-Nakba* (Israeli Independence Day), the displaced inhabitants of Ma'loul return to the ruins of their village for a picnic in which they recall memories of their lost home. This practice of integrating their story into Israel's national day of celebration becomes what Lila Abu-Lughod and Ahmad Sa'di frame as a "counter-memory" (2007), as Palestinian narratives of loss challenge Israel's foundational narrative. This focal point of 1948 becomes the center of "Palestinian time" that sees a series of defeats marking Palestinian history of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century radiating from this central point (2007: 4-5). History comes to life in opposing forms, leading to narrative contradictions and physical violence.

Given Israel's dominant narrative, both in terms of political recognition as a nation state and physical and military presence on a land, the Palestinian "counter-memory" is a suppressed narrative. Their version of history is suffocated through physical exclusion: restricted work access, subjugation to militarized border crossings, permanent existence in impermanent camps, forced resettlements, construction of walls, and a continued state of exile for millions of refugees. The repression of their stories, spaces, and lives creates a state of daily struggle that can take violent turns. This at times culminates into outbursts to enact counter transformation, such as during the First *Intifada* (uprising) (1987-1993),

Second *Intifada* (2000-2005), or more recent escalations of violence such as the Israel and Gaza War of the summer of 2014. The struggle to sustain a counter narrative in the face of physical dominance generates a cycle of violence and irresolution.

Along with these conflicts, the creation of a Palestinian counter-memory presents internal dilemmas. Rooted in trauma, it faces “the difficult task of expressing the essence of a shattered, displaced, and scattered nation while showing how a disparate set of experiences and practices actually cohere” (Abu-Manneh, 2006: 66). The creation of the Palestinian narrative is also troubled by questions of how to incorporate the past. While Abu-Lughod and Sa’di’s book about *al-Nakba* asserts the importance of reclaiming memories of this event as an action that “affirms identity, tames trauma, and asserts Palestinian political and moral claims to justice, redress, and the right to return,” they also acknowledge that returning to this event brings up issues that “can burden present generations whose own traumas might be made to seem like mere echoes, or who want to forget” (2-3). Privileging certain moments of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict as the defining moments of Palestinian identity can undermine the narratives of younger generations whose narratives are, as in the case of second or third generation survivors, overwhelmed by the burden of the past they inherit. Marianne Hirsch describes how this leads to a generation of postmemories in which memories of the past take on a new life for the children of survivors, who become caught up in these pasts (2008). The insertion of the painful past into all narratives can hinder movement toward the future. Yet as the trauma initiated by this past leads to continued violence in the present, it cannot be fully dismissed. The struggle within the Palestinian narrative becomes how to include the past and its disparate voices while leaving space open for the future.

This struggle for a homeland in the region as demonstrated in *Tale of the Three*

*Jewels*, is also part of a larger endeavor for a nation and national identity carried out by a population whose majority lives in exile. The Palestinian state of internal and external exile is part of both the ongoing Israeli/Palestinian conflict and Khleifi's *oeuvre*. In Palestinian cinema, the state of exile forms another contradiction as it both facilitates the creation of a Palestinian narrative and yet also contributes to its instability by channelling the exile's precarious position. Exile, as a state of being in transition between states, opens up a new space for reflection and identity creation. Making his films from a point of exile, Khleifi uses this position to reach that space in his films, playing with the contradictions of exile to negotiate the new identity being formed.

Hamid Naficy, working extensively on exile from a position of media and cultural studies, elaborates on the concepts of exile, the home, and the community it creates. He proposes exile as a position "inexorably tied to homeland and to the possibility of return" that, instead of reconnecting with the old narrative, find itself negotiating between the home culture and the culture of the host country and forming a new narrative (1999: 3). Exile thus represents "a process of becoming" that involves separation, a liminal state (possibly perpetual) and finally integration into the new community (1993:19). While he uses this to represent the process of an exile creating a new identity in relation to the host country, in the case of Palestine this process of becoming rather facilitates the goal of creating a Palestinian identity in relation to the home.

Following the idea of exile as a process of identity creation, Khleifi's films demonstrate the exilic community's potentialities in creating a national narrative.<sup>17</sup> The lyrical filming of landscapes accompanied by passionate discourses of the homeland in

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<sup>17</sup> Other exilic artists and intellectuals have also contributed to the shaping of this narrative. Some of the most prominent examples include the national poet Mahmoud Darwish, writer Ghassan Kanafani, filmmaker Elia Suleiman, and academic Edward Said.

Khleifi's films, from *Al Dhakira al Khasba (Fertile Memory, 1980)* to *Route 181: Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel* (co-directed with Eyal Sivan, 2004), place the longed for land as a central subject, playing to the exilic desire to return to the lost homeland. However instead of falling into the position of nostalgia, which in exile often becomes what Boym would describe as "restorative nostalgia", Khleifi uses this attachment to the land to create a new identity from the point of exile. In writing on the director, May Telmissany emphasizes the importance of filmmakers like Khleifi in forming a Palestinian identity as they have "succeeded in establishing a recognizable cultural identity of the Palestinian people, whereas other structure of discourses (institutional and political) have failed"(2010: 70).<sup>18</sup> Though the director himself is living outside the home country, Khleifi's films not only conjure up images of the land, but establishes the identity of a people predominantly living in exile by creating a national narrative tied to the land.

The Israeli and Palestinian homeland narratives compete and intertwine with each other as much as within themselves. Khleifi's films are born of these contradictions. These unsettled narratives portray an unresolved past and present that, in its state of negotiation and uncertainty, continues to overwhelm the future in both fictional worlds and reality.

### 3.4 Spaces of Violence

Surrounded by the palpable effects of this living history that shape his life, the fairy tale quest that Youssef imagines for himself takes him away from this life as an internal refugee living in a camp in a militarized zone. Youssef's fairy tale quest is an escape from that space as he must leave his homeland in order to recover the lost jewels. Looking to leave

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<sup>18</sup> Telmissany's article describes Khleifi's cinema as that of the Palestinian *al-shatat*, which translates into "diaspora" or "exile". In English she aligns Khleifi more with the position of diaspora, emphasizing the community aspect that she sees in that term as opposed to the individuality of exile (2010).

his home/homeland, this quest is nevertheless tied to these concepts as he seeks to rectify the past loss of homes in order to look to building new ones. By returning the lost jewels to Aida's grandmother and the family home from which they were lost, he will ensure his future home with the girl he loves.

Yet this dream of a new home and life cannot escape his homeland's present instability. The violent intersections of Youssef's fantasy space clash with his lived-in space of the Gaza Strip, impeding his movement between the two and leading to the violence that frustrates his fairy tale. The evocation of a very specific space in *Tale of the Three Jewels*, as opposed to the traditional fairy tale setting of long ago and far away, becomes a prominent part in the film's storylines. This space demonstrates how the continued contestation over these spaces leads to violence and forestalled futures in the region's fictional and nonfictional narratives.

While Youssef seeks to leave his home to travel to distant lands, this is not, as in many cases of Palestinians, a tale of expulsive exile. Here the protagonist's journey is that of a fairy tale in which one must leave home, go away, and then return. This fairy tale journey, however, does represent some of the more nuanced aspects of Naficy's ideas of exile. Naficy explores how exile and the link between the homeland changes as exile comes to reflect a new kind of postmodern condition in which the exile's referent of a home, or homeland, is destabilized resulting in "a radical redefinition of what constitutes exile, from a strictly political expulsion and banishment to a more nuanced, culturally driven displacement" (1999: 9). The nuances that he describes can also be seen in the complicated, destabilized, position of Palestinian exile. Not only is the referent continually changing as borders are redrawn, communities are destroyed, and settlements erected, but also so are the ways of relating to that referent, especially with new media and technologies



that allow for virtual and physical connections to the homeland and family in exile. Further, as exemplified in Youssef's case, the "political expulsion" and "culturally driven displacement" can happen within the homeland itself, resulting in a clear distinction of spaces within the region and the violent conflict over them.

Though eventually forced into a violent and internal exile, Youssef finds spaces free of that in which he evokes the magic of the fairy tale. Youssef's desire to set out on a quest is inspired by love that occurs free from these historical and political confines. The two lovers meet in an oasis that does not hold any of the markers of the other spaces they traverse on a daily basis. Instead of being surrounded by soldiers and barbed wire lining the streets that are reminders of their "political expulsion" enforced in their own land by the military, they are here in an open space lined by plants that offer food and magic. At home in this element, Aida talks not of politics or the escalating conflict that all the children are aware of, but rather of the magic and spirits that can still be found in this last oasis. In this secluded spot, Youssef and Aida create a space in which stories are unencumbered by the current conflicts surrounding them.

Youssef and Aida's journey, however, takes them away from the magical space they have found and try to develop and into the conflicts of their home. Thus, the loss and reclamation of home and homeland takes on an increasingly influential role in Youssef's journey. The overpowering physical context of the story becomes inescapable and eventually causes the film's historical and fairy tale narrative to converge. The past's relationship of conflict to a space that continues to be the site of territorial wars and displacement haunts and unsettles the space of the present and even the dreams of a future. Just as the Palestinian narrative must create a "counter-memory" (Abu-Lughod and Sa'di, 2007) against an enforced Israeli memory, so too does this constitute making a counter-

space. Space, and especially the conceptualization of homes and homelands, is critically examined in *Tale of the Three Jewels* as an inescapable element that continues to interrupt the narrative of the region as long as it remains unsettled.

As Youssef begins his journey to set out to distant lands and recover the lost jewels, the first impediment he encounters is his inability to leave his own homeland. In an attempt to cross borders, Youssef tries to go to Israel to earn money for a plane ticket. As a young Palestinian, however, his pleas to cross the border and work are ignored at the Israeli checkpoint and he is not allowed entry. Youssef wanders around the heavily armed border checkpoints that everyday control the movement of people in the region, clearly out of place and unsure how to interact. A shot looking as if it was pulled directly from archival footage shows a complete lack of interaction between him and the background as the soldiers move about their business with Youssef on the side, suggesting that this scene has been manipulated and he has been falsely entered into this story. The visual disconnect reflects the separation between him and the soldiers that live in his town.

As another alternative to begin this magical quest in a very real way, Youssef goes to a travel agency to buy a ticket. Again, he is ignored as his youth and lack of paperwork and financial resources all inhibit him from this possibility. The adults talk over him and deny his pleas; his desire to leave this area is stuff of the imagination. Still in his own homeland, Youssef experiences a “political expulsion” as well as a “culturally driven displacement” in which as a Palestinian and youth, he is disenfranchised within his society.

Voiceless and disregarded in his own home, Youssef’s thoughts turn to more dramatic ways to get away from his confines. Not only does he create the escape of a fairy tale that allows him to imagine new worlds, but he must also physically escape from this territory to fully realize his dreams. Youssef continues to try to leave his inherited past

behind by hiding himself in a crate of oranges destined for Europe. Instead of going into exile carrying a piece of the homeland with him, in this case he is having a piece of the homeland take him into what would become a state of exile.

This attempt to leave the land reinforces his connection to it, especially as the oranges are mentioned as a path to liberation at several points in the film. For Youssef's father, who after being released from prison rants about oranges in his delusional state, they are a way to relive a past in which he was more connected to the home and homeland. For the father of Youssef's friend Salah, who owns the orange groves, it is this connection to the land that lets him escape the economic depression of the Palestinians in Gaza and build his home and achieve a degree of economic stability that eludes both Youssef's and Aida's family. Finally, for Youssef, the oranges are a way to cross borders and escape to the future. The land is always present and continues to shape the people and their stories.

This escape, as well as the relationship with the land, is complicated. Youssef's physical escape is thwarted as the movement of his crates is blocked by a three-day curfew enacted by the Israeli military in response to violent uprisings that stops any movement. Despite one impediment, Youssef still manages to realize his quest as he dreams of the discovery of the three jewels while asleep amidst the oranges. From the crates, Youssef is taken in his dreams to an oasis where he encounters a wise man who helps him discover the three jewels. This oasis and the man he encounters are not those of a foreign land but instead resemble the land and the men of his own region. In his quest, he never leaves his homeland and discovers that the jewels were there all along. When he leaves the crate, he knows he has completed his journey. Here again, however, he must confront the reality of his space: Israeli soldiers shoot him as he tries to run through the orange groves towards his love and his future. The land offers ties to the past and dreams of the future, but in its

present disputed state it can realize neither.

Constantly confronted with the boundaries of his homeland, and the violence that they engender, Youssef is stuck between the confines of his world and his dream of alternative worlds. While the innocence that Youssef maintains despite the negative confrontations in the former leaves the fairy tale with a degree of hope, it also delays the development of the protagonist as he is unable to learn the fairy tale's lessons. Warner remarks that in the fairy tale the "boundlessness serves the moral purpose of the tales, which is precisely to teach where boundaries lie" (1994: xvi). Fairy tale theorists such as Warner and Bettelheim view that an important aspect of the fairy tale is to teach social boundaries that one must learn in order to integrate into, and survive in, society. However, in the film, Youssef is constantly hindered by boundaries and cannot experience the boundlessness that is an important space in fantasy. By losing this experience, Youssef also misses out on the opportunity to learn ways of personally coping with the boundaries that define his social setting. Youssef cannot save himself in this situation: either he must give up his dreams completely or he must give up his real world. By dreaming of his final escape, and paying for this dream with his life, Youssef shows that instead of learning to live with the imposed boundaries he will enter another world altogether.

In the case of Palestine and the on-going conflict with Israel, *Tale of the Three Jewels* positions boundaries as a dangerous hindrance that violently divides space and interferes with development. Not only does the violence threaten Youssef's ability to dream, but it poses a greater threat to the next generation: nonexistence. Youssef tells Aida that he must go on his quest and grow up in order to marry her, but he never gets the chance. The threat to Youssef and his generation is foreshadowed earlier in the film when a group

of young men tell a shop owner to be kind to Youssef and his friend Salah because they are the next generation. Immediately after they offer these words looking towards a hopeful future, they themselves are gunned down in the street by Israeli Special forces as the two children watch. Youssef and Salah's silent observation of the gross violence that is carried out even in public evokes the Palestinian icon Handala. This cartoon created by Palestinian refugee Naji Al-Ali depicts a young refugee in single panel cartoons who silently witnesses the tragedies of his homeland. Unchanging in his state of perpetual poverty and traumatized youth, Handala's own development is forestalled by the violence around him. Like this young character, and his creator who was assassinated in 1987 on his way to work in his London offices, Youssef is also unable to react. This immobility in the face of overwhelming oppression later leads to Youssef's own death as he is unable to resist in his confrontation with a soldier and is shot.

Youssef's actual journey in the film, then, is not made up of the typical tests that a fairy tale protagonist must face in the land of the unfamiliar to prove that he or she is worthy of returning to the familiar. Instead, his confrontations are with the reality of the space around him. Also differing from the fairy tale is his inability to overcome these tasks. History is a formidable foe and without the magic of the fairy tale, the hero is unable to overcome its perimeters. The historical narrative subsumes the fairy tale as it blocks Youssef from fully entering the realm and being able to use the tools it possesses.

Youssef's fairy tale quest is further forestalled when it is revealed that the real impetus behind his journey is not one of fulfilling magical tasks in a land far away but rather is tied to the reclamation of home and homeland. When Aida first told Youssef the story of the lost jewels she elaborated on how her grandfather lost three jewels from her grandmother's necklace in a South America. This fitting introduction to a fairy tale quest

prompted Youssef to believe that he needed to set out on a journey from his homeland and travel and travel across the seas to recover the jewels.

This story, however, is later changed when the older generations intervene in the narrative. After Youssef disappears in search of the jewels, his and Aida's families are brought in to find him and hear of Aida's tale. Aida's grandmother reveals that the jewels were actually lost when the family had to flee their homes during the internal displacement that happened as the state of Israel was created. This is the defining event in the Aida's family narrative of how they were uprooted and became homeless wanderers, a position that is stigmatized even among displaced Palestinians as they do not even have the "impermanent" turned permanent shelter of the refugee camps. The narrative inspiring both Aida's family's and Youssef's journey is not one of travels to distant lands but rather that of internal displacement and journeys within a fractured territory. This revelation brings the fairy tale back to reality that is inescapable and that the fairy tale must address. The actual loss of a home (and homeland) that ignites the fairy tale and serves as one of its recurring themes is presented as a past that cannot be overlooked in any efforts to move forward.

Within the territorial dispute of this unresolved conflict, generations share the narrative of the loss of home as each continues to live the returns of trauma. The narrative that influences both the realist storyline and, it is revealed, the fairy tale, is the 1948 exodus of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes during *al-Nakba* which, as Abu-Lughod and Sa'di state, is the central point of "Palestinian time" (2007). The loss of Palestinian home and territory in order to create the homeland of Israel led to a massive and enduring refugee crisis that, with some 5 million refugees, 1.5 million Palestinians living in refugee camps, and continued violence in the area, still shows no signs of possible

relief.<sup>19</sup> This event and its after effects thus continues to not only haunt but traumatize and re-traumatize succeeding generations who live through the repetition of this history in ongoing territorial encroachment, displacement, and violence.

This is seen in the stories of different generations in the film. Youssef's mother, for example, fondly recalls the time when she and her husband were allowed to walk freely on the beach in Gaza. This, however, is an experience denied to Youssef and his generation; for them, the beach is a militarized zone complete with barbed wire and soldiers. Instead of demonstrating improved conditions with the succession of time, Youssef's generation still lives under the repercussions of past events and, in this case, are worse off than before. The film also alludes to the exilic populations that this exodus has created. The blind man Abou Iman sits facing the horizon and waiting for his children, who have moved to Canada, to return. Though his neighbours try to humour the old man and not contradict his last wish, everybody around him knows that his wait is futile and his children will not return. The film presents in several ways how the loss and further restriction of space that has shaped previous generations is an ongoing experience that also shapes the current generation. The film's young protagonists are thus caught in a liminal space as they their movements are regulated and they find themselves removed to literal in-between spaces such as the refugee camp where Youssef lives, or the wandering camp of Aida's family. As refugees who have been exiled in their own homeland these children continue to live the conflict started generations before them.

Nevertheless, the film does offer the hope of a fairy tale as Youssef and Aida defy

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<sup>19</sup> Numbers of refugees taken from UNRWA. They define Palestinian refugees as "persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict" as well as the descendants of Palestinian refugee males. (<https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>). Accessed August 16, 2017.

these troubled spaces and dream of a liberated future. Fleeing from their precarious homes, the two physically leave the world of the camps and occupation to create a story of wonder and magic in the open spaces of the oasis and beach. The film's long, fluid shots of unimpeded landscapes creates a sense of hope that there are open territories in which these children may one day be able to roam freely. Currently off limits, the reaching eye of the camera brings these spaces into grasp as it transcends physical borders that the young protagonists can now only access through dreams. The hope and freedom offered by these unimpeded landscapes emphasize the need for open spaces and the freedom of movement to allow for dreaming.

It is this quality of openness that Warner focuses on in her description of the fairy tale's atmosphere. She notes that the film creates a sense of wonder by disturbing "the apprehensible world in order to open spaces for dreaming alternatives" (1994: xvi). The fairy tale hope that *Tale of the Three Jewels* offers is in these unhindered spaces and the possibilities they offer. It is only when Youssef and Aida physically leave the world of the camps and occupation to create a fantastic story in the open spaces of the oasis and beach that they can envision a different path than the one offered to them as refugees imprisoned in Gaza. In these moments and spaces of freedom, Aida tells stories of distant lands, lost jewels, and love that Youssef eagerly accepts, dreaming of his own role in the fairy tale and his destiny to leave Gaza and win Aida's heart. They are able to briefly escape the destructive present through the tale they create together and, even though current events would make it seem impossible, dream of a future.

The beach, with its unpopulated landscapes and free flowing waters that represent one path to new horizons, symbolizes the mobility denied to this new generation. This symbol is transformed into a living reality as the beach also becomes a site for protest and



liberation dreams for the unnamed youth in one of the film's many storylines. As this narrative progresses, the marches and demands for freedom carried out by Palestinian youth not much older than Youssef himself come to occupy the space of the beach. In these scenes the beach becomes a space for multiple dreams as well as the violence that will impede them. The revolting youth eventually clash with the army and several young people are killed. The encroachment of the violence into this space overwhelms it, thwarting the attempts to escape the past and present.

As the film shows the intersection of the fairy tale and Gaza's political upheaval, it demonstrates the trauma of losing space and the inability to reclaim it. By exploring this trauma of losing a homeland, powerful enough to thwart imagination and prevent dreams of the future, *Tale of the Three Jewels* also delves into the frustration of creating a new space to escape this past. The film's final shot returns to the overshadowing presence of the violent discourse about space in relation to the continued conflict between Israel and Palestine. The camera leaves the characters to return to the sea: the beach where Youssef's mother once swam, the strip along the refugee camp where Youssef and his family now live, the space where Youssef meets his friends and dreams of the future, and the site of protest where the young demonstrated and were killed in the fight for territory. This last glimpse of a space evokes the conflicted possibilities of return, escape, or change. In the end, the white dove of peace appears, recalling the last scene with Youssef in which he is magically resurrected. This time as the bird flies away, the camera returns from the sea to the beach itself, deserted and fortified with barbed wire. Just as the conflict between Israel and Palestine continues, so does the trauma of the loss of space and the thwarted dreams of a new state.

While *Tale of the Three Jewels* presents the space as still contested, it does show

how fantasy can be used to confront and question these spaces without violence. The multiple converging storylines show that while certain narratives, namely that of the unresolved past, still play an overwhelming part in shaping the present and the future, there are still narratives being created and struggled for that challenge this position. The fantasy does not only reflect the narrative of the loss of home; it also shows the potential to dream of new spaces and homes even in the midst of violence.

### **3.5 Dreams of the Palestinian Experience**

Just as Youssef cannot escape his space, he also cannot escape his part of the Palestinian experience. Throughout the film, Youssef is constantly reminded of his Palestinian identity. Youssef's family and community teach him that he must embrace this collective identity. When Youssef offers to sell his gold necklace in the shape of Palestine to help his family through their financial difficulties, his mother and sister protest, telling him that he must always keep this gift from his father close to his heart. Youssef's school lessons, which include drawing maps of the territory, reinforce this identity, as do the stories of his family and neighbours that idealize this seemingly lost land.

These reminders are not always positive; Youssef is also reminded of his identity by the presence and violence of the Israeli army that threatens his movements, family, and dreams because he is Palestinian. Youssef is in a liminal position because of this identity as he both tries to flee it and the circumstances it inspires and yet is constantly and violently reminded of it. This, in turn, prompts a conflicting need to both reinforce and escape the identity. As Youssef's individual experience intertwines with his collective identity, the narrative captured and commented on here becomes not just Youssef's experience, but also the Palestinian experience from which neither Youssef nor his dreams can untangle

themselves.

The multiple storylines in *Tale of the Three Jewels* go beyond those inspired by dreams and those inspired by the events of the region to include the myriad perspectives of the Palestinian experience. As the story is expanded to include multiple secondary accounts it contributes to Khleifi's construction of the "Palestinian national narrative as an open, fluid, and diverse one" (Gertz and G. Khleifi, 2008: 97). Filmed in the Gaza Strip and set during the First *Intifada*, *Tale of the Three Jewels* sets the scene for a poignant engagement with a diverse and unsettled collective. Grounded in this very particular reality of limbo caused by travel restrictions, curfews, residence in camps, and the waves of violence in the region, the film engages an experience of the region that is not just a ghost from the past but is a lived and unresolved present that makes the film, even more than twenty years later, still contemporary. The larger collective experience thus comes to play a leading part in the film as it shapes Youssef's story while also introducing the diversity within its own narration.

This chronicle builds itself precariously upon the perennial question of how to create a national narrative with no nation. In his introduction to *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema*, Hamid Dabashi proposes that this contradictory challenge is at the heart of Palestinian cinema and not only shapes but is shaped by the films from the region (2006: 7). Evocative in Dabashi's title, cinema serves as a place to dream of a nation for a people with a diverse set of experiences who, without a state or even fixed community, must ground their identity in cultural productions that can be shared across the far reaches of a displaced population. It can bring together a group who, through exile, find themselves in a perpetual state of identity negotiation between past and present cultures that characterize an understanding of "exilic culture" (Naficy, 1993). In creating a new identity,

the exile finds himself not only between two cultures, but in between his own culture, both embracing and rejecting it. The exile enters a state of perpetual becoming in which the “end result is not unified or stable” (1993: xvi).

This instability is reflected in Palestinian narrative; Said’s descriptions of the “formal instability” of the literature as one of broken, stumbling narratives (1999: 38), such as seen in Emile Habibi’s celebrated *The Pessoptimist* (1974) which is highlighted by Said as an exemplar of this instability, can not only be seen in Khleifi’s films, but in the exilic narrative as well where broken and clashing narratives forestall stable identity development. Although holding the potential to be a uniting force, Palestinian cultural representations face the challenge of including multiple, often contradictory narratives that all become incorporated in an unresolved dream of a nation with no nation.

*Tale of the Three Jewels* contributes to bringing these broken and sometimes even clashing narratives together by using the imaginative aspects of the fairy tale to dream of a nation that is in-between lived experiences and an imagined future. This space is unsettling as it emphasises opportunities that are simultaneously dreamed of and violently taken away by the region’s conflicts. In the film, the fairy tale’s magic in breaking boundaries and weaving together stories from different times and places counteracts this challenge by merging multiple stories into one narrative. Secondary characters who would normally serve merely to support the protagonist become their own entities, speaking to the diversity of the collective and representing some of its possible positions. Yet though each represents an individual story that could be developed into its own account, these narratives are nevertheless bound in irresolution and overburdened by the past.

Youssef’s mother and his old blind neighbour Abou Iman are two storytellers in the film who, themselves stuck in the past, repeatedly insert it into the present. The mother

recalls the past to her children who listen to these stories as if they were fairy tales of a distant and unimaginable time. Abou Iman, who sits on the beach or in the streets and only wants to tell stories of long ago and of children far away, is avoided because he is out of touch with his surroundings. While he too dreams of a future in which his emigrant children will send him money or return, Abou Iman is literally blind to the present and the future. The young run off from his stories and delusions, leaving him blindly facing the sea and stuck in the past. These two figures continue to be part of the Palestinian experience, and while they serve as an important reminder of history, their insistence on reliving the past holds back younger generations from moving forward.

By running from these stories, however, the younger generations also contribute to this impasse. Youssef and his siblings are more concerned with their present and future than their mother's tales of an unimaginable time and Aida creates her own creative tales that overlook her grandmother's actual details. About Iman is avoided by the youth around him as they do not want to be caught up in memories. This disengagement of younger generations further adds to the unsettled present, as by only looking forward they cannot address the problems of the past. This generational impasse is one instance showing how the multiple perspectives of an experience can further contribute to its irresolution.

Included in the group of youth running from the past towards the future in the First *Intifada* are Youssef's brother and sister. The film offers some candid moments with these two characters that, while not necessary to plot development, add to a deeper picture of the multiple perspectives of Youssef's generation. Like Youssef, both undergo individual struggles as they work to realize a dream of a brighter future and both also have their stories cut short in the greater narrative of the film. Youssef's brother dreams and fights for political liberation in the same oasis where Youssef imagines his fairy tales. Though the

brothers take different paths, their stories mirror each other as both dream of a future that promises escape from their present but is interrupted by the violence surrounding them. Connected in their similarities, the brothers' experiences can be read as part of the same story. Youssef's narrative of youthful dreams represents a possible story of his brother's past and his brother's story of rebellion against the status quo is Youssef's possible future. These stories are further intertwined as they both encounter a frustrated future; Youssef falls victim to the surrounding violence and his brother's story, which does end with the promise he has escaped the Israeli Special Forces, is nevertheless shrouded with the uncertainty of how much longer he and his friends will survive.

Youssef's sister also has a revolutionary story reflective of her generation in its aspirations and frustrations. Forced to give up her dreams of becoming a singer and confined to the domestic realm when her father is sent to prison, she continues to be an integral part of the fight against occupation and the status quo. Not only does her quick wit save Youssef's brother and his friend when they are on the run, but she is portrayed as a woman who will fight for greater female equality in Arab society. Scenes of her in front of the mirror admiring her beauty and questioning why she should be hidden under the veil and in the house demonstrate her desire to fight dictated female roles and carve a new way forward.

As the storyteller who guides Youssef's quest and bridges his dreams and his reality, Aida is another young woman who takes on a leading role in constructing narratives and promises to lead the shift to greater gender equity in the future. Not just a passive love interest, Aida weaves and actively participates in the story. When Youssef first encounters her, she is in control of the scene. Kneeling over Youssef after he has been tackled by the other children, Aida leads the conversation as she questions Youssef and his stories. The

camera looks up at her, framing her face in a tight close-up that allows her to dominate the shot and hold power over the images of the other children and of Youssef on the ground. In this first scene of their encounter, Aida asserts her power and magic, affirmed by the rainstorm that, as if summoned by her, breaks up the exchange.

From this point, Aida becomes a powerful and integral part of the story as she provides the magic that allows Youssef to escape. She offers to help Youssef wash away his fear by teaching him how to make “*jinn* soap”<sup>20</sup> using what she claims to be an ancient recipe from their land that the heroes used to wash their faces so they would never be afraid. As he plans to travel to South America to recover the three jewels, Aida comes to his house to offer him a present that resembles a set of magic talismans: a snakeskin, half of a photo, and some herbs to protect him on his quest. Aida not only offers Youssef magic to protect him from the harm that he might encounter in his dangerous quest, she also shares the stories that will help him escape the violent world surrounding him. In this way Aida becomes what Vladimir Propp describes as a donor, a character who possesses magical powers that she will bestow on the hero (1968). Aida’s position both gives the hero the power to dream and Aida the ability to take some control over her present as she looks to write her future.

In their control over several narrative lines, these young women both represent an as-yet unfulfilled narrative for a new future of greater female empowerment. This contributes to Khleifi’s argument that in the Palestinian cause there needs to be greater emancipation of women in Arab culture. Khleifi argues that the disenfranchisement within Arab culture of particular groups, especially women, diminishes Palestine’s strength,

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<sup>20</sup> *Jinn* are supernatural beings in Arabic and Islamic culture that represent “an order of spirits lower than angels, said to have the power of appearing in human and animal forms, and to exercise supernatural influence over men” (OED Online, 2018) (accessed February 17, 2018).

which could be fortified through greater inclusion of all groups and experiences (2006: 48). Women hold strong positions in several of Khleifi's films, including *Al Dhakira al Khasba* (*Fertile Memory*, 1980) and *Le cantique des pierres* (*Canticle of the Stones*, 1990) as well as his most internationally acclaimed film *Urs al-jalil* (*Wedding in Galilee*, 1987). The connection between female liberation and Palestinian liberation is a recurrent theme for, as May Telmissany notes in an article on the filmmaker, "fertile women oppressed by men resemble fertile land oppressed by the occupier" (2010: 78); thus the liberation of women is also tied to the liberation of the land. This theme is continued in *Tale of the Three Jewels* in which the strength exercised by the women, as well as their survival at the end of the tale, position them to be the protagonists in future narratives.

These narrative glimpses of multiple people and perspectives that make up a Palestinian collective challenge the idea of one universal or ultimate Palestinian experience by showing its diversity. While this poses important questions, the complication to the narrative does forestall it by introducing the need for a multifaceted instead of single vision of the future. It also proposes that internal as well as external factors shape an experience and forecast its future. The film at once presents a drive to admit multiple perspectives into a greater narrative while also highlighting how they are lost in current debates.

Though the stories of other characters represent their own possible paths, like Youssef's fairy tale quest, these stories also become absorbed in a larger collective experience of the homeland they cannot escape. In this case, the stories become part of the First *Intifada* uprisings, another unresolved storyline inserted in the narrative that at once struggles for change for the future and yet is overwhelmed by the past. The story of the First *Intifada*, a new generation fighting for a more promising future, is a shared collective experience that encompasses the fantasies and realities of Youssef, Aida, and the other



youth in the film. Even Youssef's fairy tale is incorporated in this narrative as it shares in the same dreams and frustrations of his generation and Palestine, marching forward yet unresolved in both the fictional and historical narrative.<sup>21</sup>

The hope for the future is maintained in Youssef's physical defeat that simultaneously allows him to keep his innocence and dreams for the future intact. As the fairy tale protagonist, Youssef's journey should take him on the path to maturity and its awareness of how to integrate into society. This knowledge and the acceptance to live with it comes at a price as he will lose the wonder and innocence that sustained him on his journey. Instead, Youssef retains these qualities through his death. The film, in maintaining his innocence, offers hope to the children (and adults) who have lost their dreams and innocence in the conflict. Khleifi's fairy tale becomes what Bettelheim, quoting Lewis Carroll, describes as the "love gift of a fairy tale" (1976: 26). Thus, even though the fairy tale is forestalled, the use of the fairy tale narrative in *Tale of the Three Jewels* keeps the dream alive, offering children and adults the possibility of new dreams of the future.

The fairy tale in *Tale of the Three Jewels* offers to its characters something closer to the positive aspects of the fairy tale. In his defence of fairy tales, J.R.R. Tolkien celebrates these stories for offering recovery, escape, and consolation. While the audience is usually the beneficiary, the fairy tale also serves the characters in *Tale of the Three Jewels* by providing Youssef and Aida with a way to cope with the unsettling reality that they must face.

Of the three functions described by Tolkien, the most important one at play in *Tale of the Three Jewels* is the power of escapism. Tolkien notes that while most approach the

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<sup>21</sup> This struggle continued in the Second *Intifada* 2000-2005. After several bloody years of fighting, this protest of Israeli occupation was also unable to offer this 'happily ever after' ending.

idea of escape with disdain, he instead embraces it, saying that it can be “very practical, and may even be heroic” (1964: 11). He notes several different levels of escapism, from fleeing difficult and unwanted situations, to evading the traumas of modernity, to the desire of the ultimate escape: thwarting death. The fairy tale that Youssef and Aida create serves as a practical way for them to escape broken families, life in the camps under occupation, and the violent uprising surging around them. In this case it may even cross the boundaries of practicality to enter in what Tolkien terms as the “heroic,” their desire to stay normal children and embrace the magical and imaginative qualities of the child is an act of heroic defiance against the occupational trauma.

The importance of this defiance becomes clear when comparing these characters to other portrayals of children living through the same traumatic present. In response to Jean Mohr’s photos of Palestinian children living in camps and under occupation, Said observes that they “seem to have skipped a phase of growth or, more alarming, achieved an out-of-season maturity in one part of their body or mind while the rest remains childlike” (1999: 25). The little girl in the documentary *Jenin, Jenin* (Mohammad Bakri, 2003) about the destruction of the Palestinian refugee camp in Jenin, demonstrates this “out-of season maturity” through her speech calling for vengeance for the destruction of her home in which she even threatens to torture Ariel Sharon. Handala’s slumped posture, ragged clothes, and hands held helplessly behind his back as he witnesses continual horrors suggests a burdened maturity of all-consuming sadness that both forces his development yet keeps him in a perpetual childlike state. For these children, the forced exchange of the space of childhood for premature maturity is one toll of conflict.

Youssef and Aida’s defiant escape of this condition also acts as a way to elude the omnipresence of death. Both Aida and Youssef are most alive in the moments when they

are enveloped in their fairy tale. The extreme close-ups of the children's smiling faces capture a *joie de vivre* that is absent from the other scenes where they are confronted by the brutalities around them. Aida, grappling with the transition into adulthood, at times leaves the fantasy to confront the realities of her situation, such as when she defiantly pushes Youssef aside to reproach the Israeli soldiers that are blocking their return home. Her dreams of the future are tempered by realizations of her surroundings and the limited possibilities it presents. Youssef, however, is fully immersed in the realm of fantasy, and even in the scene of confrontation with the Israeli soldier, he stands by silently as he is unable to act outside of his alternative world.

The blank look on Youssef's face as he hides under a food cart and witnesses the street shooting of the Palestinian youth, or his refusal to see his father in prison, display a certain passivity that Youssef has towards the part of his life fully immersed in the real. He only fully comes alive in his fairy tale, even in its frustrations that are intertwined with and shaped by his reality. When he does finally show disturbance, his feverish tossing and turning and refusal to eat are reactions attributed to his lovesickness rather than the horrors he has seen. Youssef's dream and reincarnation at the end show that his fairy tale has allowed him to defy the Israeli army's attempts to kill him and escape death. Instead of actually dying, this act liberates him by allowing him to cross the borders that had confined him and start the journey forestalled in his life.

The film's fantasy reflects the intermediacy between characters, generations and the multiple perspectives that compose the Palestinian experience. At once highlighting the situation's irresolution by bringing a variety of perspectives together in one cinematic space, the film also finds the common point in these experiences: the collective hope and dreams of a future and nation not yet realized. Responding to the pain of children growing

up under the violence of occupation, Khleifi describes his purpose in making this film as rebuilding “the world of the children of Gaza and their right to dream” as well as share in a collective future with all children in the Middle East connected through a common regional history (2006: 56). By constructing a tale of multiple perspectives, including the region’s popular and religious cultural traditions, Khleifi appeals to an inclusion of diversity that can embrace a common past and, ideally, a common future in a dream that becomes a political act. Without a nation at the root of a collective experience and identity, the fantasy brings together multiple stories and shows that Palestinians, despite a haunting past and unstable present, can still dream of a nation and future together.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

The fairy tale in *Tale of the Three Jewels* is conflicted, offering a dream and hope for the future but also showing that this dream has not been reached in a homeland that remains contested. The dispute between Israel and Palestine over the home and homeland is an overwhelming force that impacts the past, present, and future and reverberates through all generations. Each generation introduced in *Tale of the Three Jewels* continues to live the experience of a divided homeland and the violence that this has enacted upon them in waves: from Aida’s grandmother who has forced to leave her home during the creation of the Palestinian state, to Abou Iman who has lost his children to exile, to Youssef’s parents who face economic depression and imprisonment, to the youth who are gunned down by soldiers. In telling a fairy tale in this context, the film shows that despite the drive to create new futures, reality and an unsettled past ultimately forestall both dreams and futures.

Telling a fairy tale in this context may be contradictory, but it is presented as

necessary. Youssef does not have other opportunities to leave behind his homeland's situation and move forward and thus must create an alternative path through fantasy. While highlighting the unsettled present and past, it also invites a confrontation with them; acknowledging that history must be confronted in order to leave it behind. Further, the multiple perspectives from different worlds that are brought together in the in- between world of fantasy show that even within the Palestinian experience there are several voices and experiences that need to be included in the dream of the future. Finally, *Tale of the Three Jewels* demonstrates that a national cinema of Palestine can be one that looks not just to the past, but to the future as well.

Yet while Khleifi provides a hope to overcome some of the region's violence and the continued return of it through trauma, his fairy tale is grounded in history, a caveat to the 'happily ever after' fantasy of the film. The film thus proposes that the very present reality cannot simply be wished away through fairy tale magic; it must be confronted in order to find a resolution. This acknowledgement is extremely important in the case of the Israel and Palestine conflict as the propagation of myths on both sides has hindered dialogue and progress towards finding a solution. As Khleifi observes about the situation, "we Israelis and Palestinians know that eventually we will make peace and coexist together. The question, however, is why don't we do that now? Why do we have to go to the point of death in order to reach peace?" (1996: 32). The practical question stemming from this is how to start on the path to peace. Khleifi's films embark on this path by creating a dialogue between multiple narratives, all of which are questioned--for, as Khleifi asserts, "questions generate life and answers death!" (2006: 54).

## Chapter 4: *Underground*: Telling Tales in Times of Conflict

### 4.1 Introduction

*Underground* was filmed and released in director Emir Kusturica's homeland, the former Yugoslavia, during the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. These conflicts consisted of the disintegration of this country and its violent transition to new states. In response to his homeland's upheaval, Kusturica directed a historical fairy tale that follows the trope of the loss and search for home amidst social change. While this quest negotiates the social and political changes occurring in the region, it is also shaped by it. The search for home and homeland in this case is a frustrated process as a constantly changing history impedes the journey to the future. Capturing a story and history marked by an on-going war and the clashing stories and storytellers that were competing to take control of and shape new national narratives, *Underground* criticizes the destructive and contentious history in which it was immersed.

A chronicle of a family and a land that through a lifespan sees the violent conflicts and changes of World War II, the Cold War, and a Civil War, *Underground* presents and re-interprets a turbulent history. The past is revisited through a fantastic rewriting of history that is nevertheless grounded in the region's past. History and fiction merge as characters actively rewrite history whilst bearing witness to the moments that marked Yugoslavia's past: WWII, the rise of Josip Broz Tito, the formation of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Tito's death, and the following Balkan War that led to a country's disintegration. In this narrative, the film returns to more than the violent conflict and political upheaval of the region, but also the constantly shifting nature of this world. The film's portrayal of national irresolution is unsettling as the

fictional enters the historical frame, exposing not only the fluidity between worlds but also the distortion of both.

The breaking of boundaries and unsettling of worlds, often with brutal results, is a theme not only carried out through the film's narrative and aesthetics, but also highlighted by the film's place in a greater narrative of a country violently redefining borders. *Underground* was filmed and released in the midst of the wars over the breakup of Yugoslavia, which saw a conflicted transition between a homeland of the past and the uncertain future of both territory and inhabitants. Behind the loss of physical structures of the house, the breakdown of the family unit, and the break-up of the homeland, a power struggle led to narrative manipulation and violence in which the places and people that were once familiar and even trusted lost their authority and credibility. In response to the loss of the familiar, *Underground* presents a fairy tale narrative that looks for the homes that are lost and still not to be found.

Despite the characters' attempts to recover a sense of the familiar—as well as a parallel undertaking by the director, who inserts a degree of nostalgia for the former homeland of Yugoslavia, or “Yugonostalgia”,<sup>22</sup> in the film-- this fairy tale trajectory is disturbed by distrust in the people and places that once held confidence. The film returns to the homes of the past and reveals that these homes were never ideal and are actually part of a larger political upheaval. As the position of the familiar is challenged in the film, other sources of authority also come under scrutiny.

The fairy tale's traditional storyteller figure is another aspect of the familiar questioned through *Underground*. Filmed and released during the break-up of his country,

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<sup>22</sup> Dina Iordanova writes that when Kusturica refused to take sides after the outbreak of war, he became labelled as “Yugonostalgic” (2002: 5).

*Underground* garnered charged responses by those who read it as a propaganda piece and, consequently, saw Kusturica as playing a political role. Iordanova's works on the director (1999, 2001, 2002) have chronicled in detail how those denouncing the film claimed that behind the exoticised Balkan imagery that Kusturica sold to critical acclaim abroad existed a more menacing piece of Serbian propaganda glorifying the aggressors in this continual, and already devastating, conflict. Critics such as Stanko Cerović and Alain Finkielkraut accused Kusturica of glorifying the film's Serbian 'heroes' while demonizing the Croatians as Fascists and Nazi collaborators or accused Kusturica of betraying his hometown of Sarajevo (cited in Iordanova, 2001: 116-117). Critics emphasized the film's Serbian funds and shooting in Belgrade to suggest that Kusturica was acting as a puppet to his Serbian sponsors, even though the film was a multi-national funded project with funds from France, Germany, Hungary, Eurimages, and with the participation of Czech, Yugoslav, Bulgarian, and Serbian studios and production companies. Though the controversy eventually lessened, especially in the West where it was for the most part written off as just another emblem of the chaotic and incomprehensible state of Balkan affairs, this debate exposed a troubling of the figure of the storyteller.

As the film explores the loss of one home and its uncertain futures, the characters and narratives are unable to be reconciled. *Underground's* narrative is forestalled as the dissection of both home and storyteller lead to the unsettling loss of authority not only within the film but also in terms of the unfolding history happening at the time of filming and release. After presenting a brief context of this political situation during the film's production, the chapter examines the troubled nostalgia of looking to the past for comfort in turbulent times that expose the past as less than idyllic. It then argues how the figure of the storyteller is the one who troubles rather than propels the narrative. This chapter



explores how *Underground* reflects the unsettlement and irresolution of a history and land through a fantasy in which the juxtaposing ideas of loss, nostalgia, and hopes for the homeland bleed between narratives and worlds. Reading *Underground* within the context of the violent disputes at the time of its creation showcases the fairy tale's social function performed within a state of dramatic changes and uncertain futures.

## **4.2 Film Synopsis**

*Underground* is a three-part tale of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Balkan history and a set of fictional characters that witness, shape, and are shaped by it. Introduced as a fairy tale that will tell of a country that once was, it nevertheless starts within the annals of history. The beginning of the narrative is dated April 6, 1941, the official start date of the German bombings of Belgrade. With their city under attack, the fictional philandering revellers Marko (Miki Manojlovic) and Blackie (Lazar Ristovski) take their families and friends to hide in Marko's underground bomb shelter. A cavernous dwelling that over time is converted into its own world, the underground becomes a parallel kingdom that is still connected to the world above but runs by its own rules.

While the inhabitants of this new world begin to shape their alternative home, above ground Marko and Blackie continue their lives as gamblers and smugglers and present their individual interests as contributing to the cause of a free Yugoslavia. Exploiting rather than fighting the war, their closest confrontation with the invading Nazi army is when Blackie kidnaps his ex-girlfriend Natalija (Mirjana Jokovich) from her German officer boyfriend with the intention of forcing a betrothal. When Blackie is captured and tortured by the Nazis and their collaborators, Marko rescues him and puts him in hiding in the underground shelter.

With Blackie underground, Marko marries Natalija and becomes a national hero for what he has marketed as his effort in the war resistance. He sells his story of resistance through his verse, which is celebrated by Tito and Yugoslavia as nationalistic poetry that solidifies the country's identity during the Cold War. Marko and Natalija further these myths as they campaign for the erection of statues to their fallen comrade Blackie and see the chronicles of their exploits captured in the national cinema. Far from the public eye, however, Marko and Natalija perpetuate a story of on-going war to keep the people that sought shelter from the war in their underground that now makes up an arms manufacturing business run by their captors. Those kept in the dark include Blackie as well as Marko's own brother Ivan (Slavko Štimac). This façade starts to crumble, however, when Blackie, eager to contribute to the resistance, escapes from the shelter of his underground world with his son Jovan (Srdjan Todorovic) to continue fighting for his country's liberation. Unfamiliar with the world above, Jovan flounders in this realm and drowns in the open waters of the Danube. Marko and Natalija, afraid of being exposed for their crimes and losing their heroic status and glorified position in the Cold War, destroy their home and evidence above ground and escape into the tunnels below.

In the film's final section, a return to "War", the characters find themselves scattered across a changing landscape. Ivan has been committed to a mental hospital, Blackie now leads a rebel army with no allegiance in the Balkan conflict, and Marko and Natalija are international arms smugglers selling for profit not patriotism. Engulfed by the violence of war as well as newly exposed personal conflicts, the end consists of the painful revelations and vicious confrontations between characters. Upon learning that it was his brother who lied to him and kept him imprisoned, Ivan tracks Marko down on the battlefield and kills him before hanging himself. Natalija is killed by Blackie's soldiers.

Blackie, lamenting the loss of his family and friends, looks for home and finally jumps down a well in search of his son. After the devastation and destruction of the final scenes, the film ends with a fairy tale: everyone is happily reunited for Jovan's wedding, where they eat, drink, and dance as the land their party is on breaks off and floats into the horizon.

### **4.3 Contexts: A Land Being Divided**

*Underground's* narration of the past in Parts One and Two culminates in an explosive present in Part Three, in many ways mirroring the Balkans' own reinterpretation of the past that was used to incite the conflict that raged in the region in the 1990s. The context in which *Underground* was being made and responded to played an important role in the film, as not only did the unfolding history become intermingled with the film's fiction, but the film also became part of the debate. As the nation of Yugoslavia fell apart, the film was scrutinized as both a potential witness and an active participant.

*Underground* was shot between October 1993 and February 1995 and was released in a longer, five-hour version on Serbian television as well as in a shortened (still almost three hours) version for international and film festival audiences that year (Iordanova, 2001; 24). The film's production, distribution, and reception thus covers a span of time in which the fight over new directions of the territories and people that had once belonged to Yugoslavia was being violently carried out to great international attention, and varied involvement, between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This was particularly true in Kusturica's hometown of Sarajevo, which had been under siege by the Serbian Army since April of 1992. The most recognized and covered event of the conflict, the Siege of Sarajevo (the "longest siege in modern European history" which left over 11,000 dead (Morrison,

2017)), as well as the fight over territory in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was a culmination in the aggressive struggle over a changing territory.

The destruction of the land occurred in several stages. The death of Yugoslavia's charismatic leader Josip Broz Tito in 1980, as well as a general economic downturn of the decade, all contributed to a growing political struggle between regions. In this time several factors that would lead to the violence of the 1990s began to aggregate, including, according to historian Noel Malcolm, "an ambitious politician in Belgrade [Slobodan Milošević] who had learnt the methods of Communist power-politics as he worked his way up the system" and a "general economic malaise and discontent, which made people yearn for decisive leadership; and the ideology of Serb nationalism" (2002: 212). At this time the growing power of Milošević and the Serbs stood to "either dominate Yugoslavia or break it apart" (212). The fractioning that Malcolm refers to officially began with an independence referendum in Slovenia in 1990 and Croatia in 1991. The latter led to escalated aggressions by the Yugoslav's People's Army (controlled by Serbia) and ethnic Serbian populations in Croatia that sparked the Croatian War of Independence (1991-1995). Serbia's territorial battles under Milošević spread out beyond Croatia into Bosnia and Herzegovina, leading to Sarajevo's siege and fighting throughout that region.

In these struggles for territory, discourse surrounding ethnic identities of the region increasingly factored in the explanations and instigations of battles being fought. While fabricated or distorted histories of ethnic hatred were overly simplistic in explaining the conflict (especially in regions with high rates of ethnic integration, such as Sarajevo) and ignored the political factors leading to these wars, these identities were manipulated to foment the fighting. As the battles raged, debates over ethnic identities and questions of loyalties and alignments became an almost inescapable question, as evidenced in the

controversy surrounding Kusturica's own position.

As tensions ran high in the midst of the war, Kusturica's cinematic intervention was a point of contention as he was accused of taking sides and betraying his hometown. In her analysis of the controversy over whether or not Kusturica contributed to creating Serbian propaganda with *Underground*, Balkan film specialist Dina Iordanova underscores that no matter how the film is read, its production contexts negate neutrality. Kusturica, by that time already an internationally recognized and celebrated director, would have easily been able to secure financial backing to make his film outside of Yugoslavia and thus "making movies in Belgrade when you have the choice of making them anywhere else is to take sides" (2001: 123). At a time where tensions were high and people were choosing to identify with specific locations and identities that had perhaps not been so prominent during the days of Yugoslavia, Kusturica was making a film with the support of the aggressive seat of power in Belgrade.

Whether or not Kusturica was making a decision about choosing a side in the war, the conflicted context in which he was making his film positioned it to be read as such. The fiction and fantasy of Kusturica's version of history was read in the context of politics and therefore viewed as having taken a side. While telling the history of the region, the film blended into its context, blurring the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction even further. What it presents, then, is a highly wary picture of the region's wars in which the film does not claim allegiance to one side but rather is critical of the violence and looking to work through this hazardous journey of the violent creation of nation states.

#### **4.4 A Wary Return Home: Defamiliarizing through Nostalgia**

Homes and homelands represent a contradictory and conflicted space in *Underground* as

well as the former Yugoslavia. The film narrates the loss and quests of different homes. It is no coincidence that even after liberated from their place in the dark, Jovan, Ivan, and Blackie all find their way back to their underground prison as it is what they also knew as home. Though not the ideal, at least this place offers the familiar. The nostalgic drive for a recuperation of the lost home aligns with the film's fairy tale narrative, also propelled by the journey home. Yet here what is revealed is that despite the drive to regain old homes or find new ones, none of the homes available to the characters are ideal. This creates an impossibility of homeland in that propels both a nostalgic desire for a home of the past and yet recognition that this past is not perfect and is lost forever.

The film's fairy tale narrative that sets up a journey for the home is thereby forestalled as the notion of home itself is troubled. As the homes of the past are questioned through a reflective nostalgia that exposes its familiarity and flaws and the homes of the future are hard to imagine, the way forward remains uncertain and unsettled. The film takes the familiar and through its dark representation of the past, ultimately defamiliarizes it and makes it seem unwelcoming. In the midst of transition, there is no ideal past to return to nor future to look forward to; as such, the film's journey home is left unfinished.

*Underground's* narrative is propelled by the negotiation of the transition between the painful loss of home and the traumatic aftermath haunted by the ghosts of the past and uncertainty of its future. The home is never stable or is always overshadowed by a more sinister aspect of the home. The film begins with the destruction of homes as the German bombs destroy Ivan's and Blackie's home as well as the city. Amidst the bombing and occupation, they must search for a new home that ends up being Marko's underground lair. While by Part II, this underground realm has been constructed into a home for those living underground as well as for Marko and Natalija above ground, both homes are tainted.

Blackie and Ivan's underground home is really a prison and Marko and Natalija are also living entrapped by their own lies above ground as they must constantly keep up their charade to not be caught above ground. This ultimately leads to the implosion of these homes at the end of Part II, and another search for homes in Part III. In this final act, there are no more homes left, and thus no possibility of return.

This loss and search for homes reflects a nostalgic and critical recreation of a lost past that, in the midst of filming, was being violently undone. The film, dedicated to "our fathers' sons," is Kusturica's look back at a land and a history from the point of view of a generation who had come of age in one nation only to watch it be violently torn apart during its middle age. The title of the complete version, *Podzemlje: Bila Jednom Jedna Zemlja*, translated as *Underground: There Once was a Land* or *Underground: Once Upon a Time There Was a Country*, clearly distinguishes the theme of familiar spaces lost as central to the film's narrative and also introduces the sense of longing that will further influence the fairy tale quest for the lost land. Nostalgically looking to return to a past space of unification, the film nevertheless troubles this past that manipulated people to keep them underground, in the dark.

*Underground* represents a complicated and controversial return home, as there is no ideal home to which one can return. This dilemma is at the heart of many of the criticisms of nostalgia, especially in the new waves of post-communist nostalgia such as the Yugo-nostalgia exemplified in works by Kusturica or GDR *Ostalgie*. Not only do these new nostalgic tendencies fall prey to being "unproductive, escapist, and sentimental...regressive, romanticizing, the temporal equivalent of tourism and the search for the picturesque.... longing for an idyllic past that never was" (Bal, 1999: xi), but they are often viewed as possibly leading to more dangerous views of history. In her

introduction to a volume on post-communist nostalgia, Maria Todorova cites Tzvetan Todorov, among other known critics, as being critical of nostalgia and warning against its dangers of erasing important denunciations of the past by focusing on the positive of history (2010: 3). Despite the disapprovals and dismissals of nostalgia that its new proliferation has triggered, it has also given rise to further study that has opened up possibilities for a greater understanding of nostalgia and its diverse uses as exhibited by artists like Kusturica.

Nostalgia has been a reoccurring theme in Kusturica's work. His early coming-of-age dramas such as *Sjecas li se Dolly Bell?* (*Do you Remember Dolly Bell?*, 1981) and *Otac na službenom putu* (*When Father Was Away On Business*, 1985) demonstrate a profound, albeit critical, sense of longing for a lost time and home. In these two films, the return home is one underscored by loss. *Do You Remember Dolly Bell* ends with a shot of Dino (Slavko Štimac) and his family setting off towards the horizon to reach the utopia of the promised communist flat that his family, confined in close quarters, has desired.

However, the realization of this dream is overshadowed by the loss of Dino's father and subsequently the loss of his innocence as he takes on his father's role as family head. In Kusturica's following work, *When Father Was Away on Business*, the return home is also accompanied by a loss of innocence. Finally able to return home with his family after his father is sent away "on business," Malik's (Moreno D'E Bartolli) image of his father is destroyed when he sees him raping his former lover for revenge. The departure of the grandfather during the wedding exposes the rifts behind this happy façade of the home and family's restoration.

Though part of this trajectory, *Underground* constitutes a darker turn in this look at the past. In this sense it more closely represents what Svetlana Boym describes in her work *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) as "reflective" rather than "restorative" nostalgia. The



former is driven by the impetus to rebuild the lost home as it existed in the past, or a search for the return of the *Heimlich*, while reflective nostalgia acknowledges the home's destruction and looks back on it through the passage of time, recognizing that this space has become *Unheimlich*.

*Underground* further frustrates the return home as the destruction of not only homes, but homelands, creates a situation in which the home becomes so defamiliarized and *Unheimlich* as to prevent any possibility of return, thus leading to reflective nostalgia. Boym's characterization of reflective nostalgia's narrative as "ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary" describes *Underground's* complicated and chaotic narrative that through its multiple characters, plots, and narrative worlds leads to the film's feeling of "defamiliarization and sense of distance" (2001: 50). The film's fragmentation and detachment subvert the nostalgic journey to the home by unsettling the space.

This compromised nostalgia further troubles the fairy tale quest and its search for either a return home or the discovery of a new home as there is recognition that the options of the past and present are undesirable. This is highlighted through the film's conflicting characterizations of the home spaces and the defamiliarized return to them. Even though it is a prison, there is something comforting in the underground home where Marko keeps his family, friends, and countrymen imprisoned. This cave's darkness is tinted with red and yellow undertones creating an atmosphere that suggests a comforting return to the original home of the womb. Despite this faint glimmer of light, the people are kept in the darkness by communism and by the cruelties of Marko's manipulation of history. This space represents the familiar as it is transformed into people's home and becomes a world that is meticulously created onscreen to show how all the living places, down to the lavatories, function in this underground world. At the same time it is the unfamiliar, as those living

there are forever forcibly kept in the darkness and manipulated into making this their home.

This complication of space is represented by the continual calling out for light to counteract the darkness. This occurs three times in the film: first when Vera is giving birth to Jovan, then when Blackie is brought to the cellar after being tortured, and finally when Marko comes underground under the fabricated premises of being beaten by Nazis. The referral to the need for more light, and enlightenment, underscores the continual denial of light in the darkness of the underground.

The trope of three, observed by Propp to be common to fairy tales as protagonists get three trials or three wishes (1968), is repeated throughout the film and is again used in the numbers of homes destroyed. In Part One Belgrade is destroyed, followed by the destruction of the underground home and its above ground counterpart in Part Two, and finally ending with the destruction of the Yugoslav homeland in the last part. The continual destruction of homes contributes to the homeland's destruction evoked in the film's original title. The shift from the strange homes of Parts One and Two to the estranged homeland of Part Three highlights the loss of space occurring during the Balkan Wars over the break-up of Yugoslavia that was happening at the time of the filming. This shift further necessitates the nostalgic bent regarding the homes in the first parts of the film.

As large-scale transitions are undergone and worlds are changed, it is the shared and familiar that is sought. In these situations, what is longed for is "the common landmarks of everyday life" that "constitute shared social frameworks of individual recollections" (Boym, 2001: 53). These, Boym offers in citing Maurice Halbwachs in reference to modernity, provide "a zone of stability and normativity" as well as a form of mediation "between the present and the past, between self and other" (53). One of these common landmarks in the film is the home that, though less than perfect, brings the characters

together in a shared space of comfort.

The nostalgic atmosphere that Kusturica creates further uses archival footage and references to the past to call upon “shared social frameworks” and common reminders of the daily life. This is most prominent in the repeated reference to the greatest mark of the everyday life in Yugoslavia: Josip Broz Tito. Just as the figure of Tito was an overwhelming presence in Yugoslavia, so too is he in the second part of *Underground*, which takes place during the Tito years. Marko and Natalija are inserted into old archival footage of the Tito and playfully make their way into the past. They dance past the recognized leader at a celebration for the liberation of Yugoslavia from the Germans and Marko is even given a medal by Tito himself. The insertion of Marko and Natalija into old footage with Tito pokes fun at the mythical stature of this leader and Kusturica’s ability to manipulate his story, especially evident in the film’s humorous reference to Tito dying from the sadness he felt at Marko’s disappearance twenty years earlier. With these insertions, there is, however, also an aura surrounding the figure. Scenes of his famous funeral with dignitaries from across the world and the Yugoslav populace in heavy mourning show the power that this man held over the people and also recalls a profound moment in which the everyday of Tito suddenly disappeared.

The film portrays reverence for Tito as both earnest and sardonic, showing at once the man’s appeal while also questioning its blind following. Marko also brings the myth of this figure into the underground world, and those making arms in their prison are led to believe that this is for Tito and his cause to free Yugoslavia. Their faith is unquestioning; upon command, members of the underground robotically repeat slogans celebrating Tito. Their lack of emotion behind these pronouncements reflects their lack of understanding of the truth of which they are deprived living in the dark. This is the dark physically imposed

by Marko, but also the result of the darkness of the Cold War and Communism.

The emotional power of this figure is displayed through Blackie who takes all references to Tito seriously and is a dedicated soldier for his leader. Though he is kept in the dark by his leader, he is genuinely touched by all tokens of affirmations. When Marko delivers to Blackie a watch from Tito, he is deeply moved by this gesture, showing how even in the worst of conditions this connection to the familiar is extremely powerful. As Blackie breaks out in song honouring his beloved leader, the community around him joins in as they go about their everyday routine, reflecting how deeply Tito pervaded the everyday of Yugoslavia. This prevailing status lends Tito, as seen in the case of *Underground*, to serve as an everyday marker recalled in an attempt to create some sense of stability in reference to the past.

The loss of this stable, if imperfect, marker contributes to the sense of mourning and melancholia that Boym acknowledges are both part of reflective nostalgia, which exhibits “a form of deep mourning that performs a labour of grief through pondering pain and through play that points to the future” (2001: 55). By pondering the imperfections and playing with the cult of Tito, *Underground* performs an act of mourning for the stable markers that are lost in the transition. The characters live and fight for Tito, and when he is gone they want to return to the prisons that the communist Yugoslavia and its leader created for them. As it undergoes the violence of transition, ex-Yugoslavia is still reverential yet working through this grief. This is a melancholic open wound that bleeds into the contemporary crisis portrayed in Part Three.

It is in Part Three that the narrative drive of both the fairy tale and nostalgic arc to return home is most emphasized and, as the film nears its conclusion, most frustrated. Though the first two sections of film do not present an ideal home, there existed at least a

sense of place and belonging to a community that offered some comfort. As the characters all embark on lonely quests to find their lost loved ones and home in the final segment, these quests are hindered by the realization that the homes are never to be returned to in the familiar state but will always be defamiliarized.

The search for the familiar propels the characters in Part Three to return underground. Ivan looks for Soni, his simian friend who has acted as his family since both lost their home at the zoo in the bombings of Belgrade in Part One. Blackie is driven by his mission to find the son he lost more than twenty years ago. He too returns underground to the place of comfort in which he had his family. Their return home, however, is of little comfort as their reunions are frustrated by the inability of familiar reconnection. Blackie's son is dead, and can only be reunited with him through his illusion. Ivan briefly finds Soni, however he also learns that it is his brother Marko who had deceived him and kept him imprisoned underground. As he regains one familial connection, he loses another.

Along with the realization that the bonds of the familiar have suffered irreparable damage, this return home is frustrated as the underground tunnels that Ivan and Blackie escaped from and now must return to are transformed by the homeland's violence. The current war, as well as the political events that occurred while Ivan and Blackie were trapped in their underground home/prison, have now transformed these tunnels into a transit point for displaced people fleeing from the loss of their own homes. The trucks carrying people along these illegal routes, a literal underground market in transit and resettlement, are all moving forward to new homes and futures, while Ivan and Blackie move against these currents to try to recover their lost homes. They are going backwards even though this route is now changed and dangerous. As he continues down this dark path, Ivan finds the tunnel walls covered with the blood of his wounded homeland, offering a

foreboding sense of the destruction that he will encounter both in the present and in his attempts to regain the past. That which was strange to begin with becomes even further unsettled as the destruction literally seeps through its walls, thwarting the search for the familiar by defamiliarizing it through violence.

The more pointed demonization of Marko in Part Three also reflects the violent disturbance of the home (land) and its frustrated returns. After destroying the strange home and underground prison that he created and maintained at the end of Part Two, Marko goes underground and detaches himself from all notions of home and homeland to become a fugitive solely in business for himself. An internationally wanted criminal with a new passport, Marko's arms smuggling for profit, once celebrated as helping to fight the Nazis, is now condemned as he is selling weapons to destroy his homeland. A soldier buying arms, played by Kusturica himself, conveys this message; he is disturbed by Marko's willingness to sell arms to either side and even mockingly comments that Marko no longer knows how to speak his own language. In the battlefield that now ravages his homeland, Marko is not only accused of forgetting and devastating his homeland, but he must also face his judgement for destroying the familiar. When Ivan finds Marko on the battlefield, he confronts his brother for his betrayal, condemning him to his final sentence of death for destroying the home (and its familial bonds) and homeland.

The film's ending highlights the betrayed familial space by returning to a resurrection of the home and reuniting its foundational family unit. Following the devastating destruction at the end of Part Three, with its fratricide, suicide, and execution, the characters are all reunited for a final wedding celebration where sins are forgiven but not forgotten. As the storyteller narrates how the country shall be remembered with "pain, sorrow, and joy" in stories that start like fairy tales with "Once upon a time, there was a

country...”, the landmass on which everybody has been celebrating breaks off from the homeland. This landmass is never to be re-joined, just as the past can never be revisited. This idyllic rendition of the space of the home is physically and narratively separated from the story. While it presents a chance for new beginnings, these have not yet been realized and can only be imagined through a state of separation. In order to conclude the story, a new narrative and journey looking not to the past, but a still unrealized future, must be undertaken.

*Underground*, despite its nostalgic and fairy tale quest narrative, never returns home. Instead, the home is portrayed in a critical light, depicted as desirable but imperfect and unattainable. The disturbances to the home undermine its appeal of familiarity as the end goal in the fairy tale. As the negative sides of the home are revealed through its changes, the progress towards it is forestalled. Instead the recognition of loss and scrutiny of the familiar that arise in violent transitions leave a melancholic realization that in the overturn of world orders there is no familiar to which one can return. The frustrated familiar forestalls journeys into the past and future by undermining all certainty, thus perpetuating the state of transition.

#### **4.5 The Man Behind the Curtain: Exposing and Examining the Storyteller**

If the fairy tale is a narrative that guides both characters and readers through a journey of transition, then it is the storyteller who stands as an authoritative figure in the context, offering guidance and counsel to all those partaking in the story. *Underground* starts and restarts at the end of the film with the evocation of the storyteller. The opening intertitle begins the film in the manner of the fairy tale with the magical words “Once upon a time...” While this story is not about a land or time faraway, as the opening goes on to specify the

starting place and point of the story in “a country and its capital was Belgrade” on “6 April 1941”, it is nevertheless a tale of history told by a storyteller. The storyteller is not seen in this moment, but his words are heard and his presence asserted. The end of the film reasserts the presence of this figure who is seen onscreen in the film’s epilogue. As the characters are reborn and reunited, the character of Ivan is transformed into the grand storyteller. While others revel in their rebirth, Ivan as the storyteller turns directly to the camera and professes that this country will be remembered and its story passed onto their children “like fairy tales” with the words “Once upon a time, there was a country...” The storytellers have the first and last word, making *Underground* a tale of not only the narrated histories of a land, but those who are narrating these histories.

The position of the storyteller, and the power he or she holds, is examined throughout the film. Underscoring the manipulations and power struggles carried out through storytelling, the film questions the construction of narratives and their ability to perpetuate violence and trauma. Exposing the tellers behind both the narratives in and behind the film forestalls the fairy tale as the teller of tales and thus the tale itself are scrutinized rather than followed to a resolute conclusion. In the case of *Underground*, the scrutiny of the storytellers within the fictional realm makes the progression of the narrative unsure while the controversy caused by the extra diegetic depiction of Kusturica as a storyteller further highlighted the conflicting contexts that shaped the story both on and off screen.

The storyteller’s appearance at times of transition is not unexpected, though the 20th century’s own traumatic transitions have led to scrutiny and shifts of the role. Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov”(originally published 1936; 1969) points to the role that the storyteller plays in



points of transition. Before the passing of experience was replaced with the passing of information, the storyteller shared not only stories but also good advice. This is especially evident in the fairy tale, which, according to Benjamin, “was once the first tutor of mankind” as “whenever good counsel was a premium, the fairy tale had it, and where the need was greatest, its aid was nearest” (1969: 101). In these cases, the story was not concerned with showing information, but rather experience and scenarios that could offer advice as well as the ability and resolve “to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits” (101). However, Benjamin notes that at the time of writing his essay in the 1930s, this figure and his services were in decline as communicated experiences and counsel were being co-opted by the passing of information. For Benjamin, this related a profound shift as “never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power” (84). The violence upon experience that Benjamin relates--a mix of war, modernity, and capitalism--underscores a 20<sup>th</sup> century trauma that is the undoing of not only the storyteller, but of the known world.

The changes and resulting silences that Benjamin sees in response to these world shifting and shattering events lead to the troubling of the storyteller and what he has to offer. Further, the succession of modernity’s information age by postmodernity’s age of questioning information signified a greater threat to the figure of the storyteller as the purposes and positions of those behind the construction of narratives came under more scrutiny. This figure is at once appealing in a story that seeks counsel in navigating this transition and is also troubling as it questions the power of those who give counsel and the stories they tell. While offering greater insight on the complexities of a storyteller, these

investigations also disturb the story and depose the voice of authority behind it.

*Underground*'s themes of narrative negotiation and, more negatively, manipulation in periods of violent transition are played out through the character's own roles in telling and shaping history. Marko, the film's grand storyteller, participates in various rewritings of history. On the one hand, he revises his profiteering roles in the land's upheaval into stories of national heroism in which he contributed to the fight for the liberation and country's creation. These exaggerated accounts are disquieting, as their theatricality can create a comic effect but they are carried out at the expense of those imprisoned. While Blackie is still free, he and Marko participate in slapstick encounters that demonstrate and irreverence and revelry in their arms smuggling business. A jovial playfulness between friends, this friendship is overshadowed by Marko's plotting to betray his friend. Later Marko's speeches commemorating the loss of his friend Blackie or his dramatic embrace on the film set of the actor playing his "dead" friend are all highly embellished rewritings of history that portray comedy through their performance. They are solemnized, however, by the knowledge that he is the one keeping his friend imprisoned.

While Marko's tales of philandering and opportunism might be portrayed as less malign and even lightened at times by dark comic relief, his betrayal of his home and homeland are parts of the story that are unforgivable. The story he writes of perpetual war for those imprisoned underground is portrayed as a malicious betrayal of his family and friends that, once exposed, is worthy of a death sentence. Marko's position in keeping a captive audience literally and figuratively in the dark frustrates the story's progress. The leader in this quest can no longer be trusted and it is the storyteller himself who must be questioned rather than followed.

While the storytellers, especially Marko, display some control over the development

of the story and the lives of others, they too are part of the larger story of history and are caught in its narratives. The context of a history of shifting homes and homelands leads the storyteller to a position in which he or she is no longer in control of the story but is also influenced by it and forced to adapt to new landscapes. Natalija, the perpetual actress who works with the storyteller to portray the history as written by the victor, represents the changes one makes to fit the shifting circumstances. A popular actress of Belgrade, Natalija becomes the companion of a high-ranking Nazi official on their occupation of the city and starts acting in German language theatre. When the power shifts at the end of the world war, Natalija accepts Marko's proposal to become his partner and thus takes on the role of freedom supporter and doting wife of the national hero for Yugoslavia. Here she also helps act out Marko's scenarios to keep his friends imprisoned. In the third part, she embraces her role as the wife and arms dealer, leaving her identity and home to become a wanted criminal.

Natalija does not seek but rather is driven to these transformations in order to survive and protect her disabled brother Bata (Davor Dujmović). She is aware of the dangerous power of the storyteller and yet is drawn to and caught in it. Though Natalija objects to the role she must play and manipulation she must enact, especially in the second part, she is caught up in a personal and social history larger than herself that shapes her experiences and choices. It is not only the storyteller who has power, but history at large forces the storytellers to adapt themselves and those around them to adapt to the larger changes that sometimes they can't even control.

Even as a storyteller, Marko is still subject to the outstanding circumstances that destabilize him as well as his authority. His development is most clearly marked in each of the transitions between homes that structure the film's three parts. Each time a home is lost,

Marko transforms himself to fit the new role: whether that be the national hero and benevolent protector in Part Two or the international arms dealer in Part Three. In these situations, Marko, like Natalija, shows the ability to adapt to the situation at hand. Yet in this survival mechanism he forfeits complete control as he must respond to the greater changes occurring around him. Each section, with its titles corresponding to the historical developments of the country (“War”, “The Cold War”, and “War”), position Marko as a storyteller under the influence of a greater history. While Marko’s telling of history can influence others and amplify violence, it is the intermingling of individual and social histories that perpetuate this violence.

Furthermore, as both a creator and an actor working within a larger context, Marko cannot be reduced to his transgressions and wholly condemned. Instead, he is to be questioned and scrutinized in his complexity. In his debauchery and revelries at the beginning of the film, Marko is presented as amusing, albeit egotistical. Marko’s rewriting of his and Blackie’s unscrupulous past as a story of national heroism to be celebrated in the newly liberated Republic of Yugoslavia is even portrayed at times as comedic through his exaggerated performances that he uses to mask his actual story. The dangers of his self-serving approach to life only become clear when he takes on the authority of the storyteller, using the narratives he has created to betray his friends and family (his home) and later his homeland. This change in character eventually condemns Marko to a violent end in which his brother Ivan kills him on the battlefield where he has sold arms that perpetuate the destruction of his homeland. This inability to retain control over the story as history disrupts and unsettles even the most carefully constructed personas and narratives points to the instability of a situation in which being converted to one character or following one narrative to a definitive conclusion was impossible.

The inconsistency of the story's storytellers, who hold a position of authority and yet are subject to the influences of history and present circumstances, forestalls the development of the fairy tale in *Underground*. The undermining of the storyteller who, in the past, offered counsel as well as a developed narrative, leads to the loss of control over the tale and its incompleteness. The storyteller is presented as a complex rather than guiding character, one who must be questioned along with the context. This contextual disturbance is especially brought into light through the extra-textual life of the film. This is represented by the insertion of and debate surrounding Kusturica as a storyteller that becomes part of the film's story as well.

Aside from the debate surrounding Kusturica's motives and his own power in crafting the story as the director/storyteller, Kusturica also consciously inserted himself into the film as a storyteller. This furthered the narrative of Kusturica's involvement and shaping of history in the film as he shows himself to be part of this process. In the film's opening and closing scenes, references to this figure include a tie to Kusturica. Before the film's opening words "Once upon a time there was a country..." appear on screen, another intertitle with the same script serves as the film's dedication. Presented "To our fathers and their children," this is a story not just for others, but by and for Kusturica (and his generation) who also has a stake in this story. Kusturica again appears at the end of the film in the transformation of the character Ivan into the storyteller. The use of actor Slavko Štimac as Ivan links the story more closely to Kusturica. Štimac has appeared in several of Kusturica's films in roles that, while not necessarily autobiographical, have corresponded with the director's different stages in life. From playing the young dreamer in *Do you Remember Dolly Bell?* to the father trying to keep his family together in *Život je čudo (Life is a Miracle)* (2004), he has come to represent a close link to the director. Inserting Kusturica

and Ivan as the ultimate voices of authority serves as a final message against a storyteller's powerful manipulations.

Kusturica's insertion of himself into the film as the storyteller calls his own role into question. He too has a stake in this story, highlighted by his dedication of the film to his generation. His introduction of himself as the storyteller undermines his position of unbiased authority and thereby his ability to end the narrative with conclusion and counsel. This causes the story to culminate with questions rather than resolution. The fairy tale journey to find a home is forestalled by the continually changing landscape and the multiple stories and storytellers that disrupt this quest. Further Štimac's declaration as the storyteller that this story is not concluded and will be passed on to the next generations, a process he starts by concluding the film with the normally introductory line "There once was a land...", demonstrates that this narrative is still fragmented and has not found its end. The trauma of the nation and individual, still being processed, has not yet coalesced into a single narrative.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

At the time of its release, the history and future that *Underground* was representing was still uncertain. Reflecting this uncertainty, *Underground* played a part in this debate by underscoring points of irresolution: the loss of homeland and the questioning of the constructed nature of histories that contributed to conflict. The film's multiple narratives and retellings of the past, manipulated by both the characters inside the tale as well as those telling it from the outside, make the journey through the changes of a homeland one of questions rather than a narrative of resolutions.

Through its forestalled narrative, *Underground* offers a space to explore uncertainty

before moving forward. Released into an unresolved dispute, the film does not offer a fairy tale end and imagining for the future. Rather than assert authority, and any particular political standpoint or set conclusion, it questions the positions of authority that have created this situation. While the narrative forward is still fragmented, offering reflection on the past, present, and future sets up a space for the next generations to inherit this story and carry out the task of creating a new future left unfinished by Kusturica's generation.

## Chapter 5: *The Blondes*: Testimonies of Generation 1.5

### 5.1 Introduction

*The Blondes* is a film in which Argentine director and daughter of the *disappeared* Albertina Carri seeks to find and tell her experience of growing up haunted by the loss of her parents. Carri was raised in a culture that promoted a collective narrative of Argentina's Dirty War (1976-1983) that focused on those who, like Carri's parents, had been "disappeared" (illegally taken and killed) by the military dictatorship under the lead of General Jorge Rafael Videla (named president), Admiral Emilio Eduardo Massera, and Brigadier-General Orlando Ramón Agosti. Carri thus struggles with a history that fails to portray her story as the child left behind. Haunted by her own trauma of losing her parents, Carri comes to haunt the dominant national narrative of the country's trauma that revolves around stories of her parents' generation. A provocative work in Argentina's narrative of its past, *The Blondes* provides a new perspective (the child's) and style (documentary fantasy) that challenges and expands collective memory and the understanding of the past's generational effects.

Near the end of *The Blondes*, the actress who plays Carri in part of the film (Analía Couceyro) visits the illegal detention centre turned police station where Carri's parents were secretly held during Argentina's military dictatorship. The visit is disturbing as this hidden past is at once known and yet it still remains hidden under the daily routine of an institution that aided in this violence and that now operates in this location that political violence. Sitting in an eerily empty playground in the Carris' old neighbourhood, Couceyro comments on the tangled relationship of the past and present stating,



I live in a country full of cracks. What was the clandestine centre where my parents were held today is a police station. My parents' generation that survived a terrible era reclaims the protagonist's part in a story that does not belong to them. Those who came after...are stuck in the middle, wounded, building their lives from unbearable images.<sup>23</sup>

An out of place adult alone in a deserted world of child's play confronting the conflicting presences and absences of the past, Carri evokes a painful intermediacy. As the one left behind, she is the figure still in place who is nevertheless perpetually out of place; the living ghost whose story is overshadowed by the spectres of the previous generation. The testament to the generation of the *disappeared*, conveyed through the largely second-hand stories and images that tell of their persecution, torture, and disappearance, casts a dark shadow on the next generation. Haunted by the dominance of these stories and the absence of her story in the national narrative, Carri's childhood trauma of losing her parents comes to haunt the memory of the past that has been created around these images and their stories. Argentina's continued contradictions and the subsequent irresolution of this period leaves Carri and her generation in a painful middle, looking for new ways to represent and work through the intermediate status of childhood trauma and for a place to insert their story in the cracks of the collective memory. *The Blondes* begins the process of filling in these narrative gaps as it follows Carri and her crew searching for the missing part of her parents' story: that which describes them as parents whose disappearance traumatized their family. Unlike the more common narratives of the *disappeared* that tell of the violence and horrors surrounding their loss, the focus of this investigation is not those who are gone but those they have left behind to construct their lives in the aftermath of violence. Often portrayed as supporting characters to stories of the missing, Carri and her generation are instead the

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<sup>23</sup> Translations of the film's dialogue and text are my own.

protagonists in an intermediate state that forces them to live under the shadows of the past and yet search for and create their own identities and present. This is a story different from that of their parents and as such represents its own trauma to confront.

While presenting a deeply personal struggle, Carri's film also positions itself in a collective discourse. Working within a historical context in which there is a thriving discussion regarding Argentina's violent military dictatorship and its resulting individual and national trauma, Carri's story and film become a disruptive opening up of the dialogue surrounding this period and its consequences. Presenting a story that is excluded from dominant narratives, the film subverts one view of history while simultaneously supplicating for a greater dialogue surrounding the diverse ways this past continues to haunt the nation's different generations. As such, not only does Carri's personal state represent one of intermediacy, but *The Blondes* becomes a story of the in-between states of a country that is still in the process of addressing the past and its place in the present.

Creating (intermediate) spaces for new narratives and subverting dominant narratives, *The Blondes*, uses fantasy to challenge and expand the collective memory of the past and further reflect on its generational effects. Fantasy, in its position as a mode that disrupts previous notions of reality and that resides in the uncertainty and hesitation it creates between worlds, plays an important part in Carri's representation as it reflects the intermediacy of Carri's personal narrative. Further fantasy's unsettling properties challenges the dominance of the collective narratives that put the generation of Carri's parents front and centre by presenting them through the fantastic. Even though these have been consecrated through official laws, memorials, and testimonial documents, not to mention the abundance of fiction telling these stories, this new perspective reveals their own instability and constructed nature. By unsettling their authority, the film creates the

space for new narratives. While these alternative stories such as Carri's are also introduced through the perturbing space of fantasy, their claims to this history are no less legitimate than others. Through this fantastic provocation of the past and its stakes in the present, *The Blondes* presents the parts of the past that are apart from yet a part of the collective memory and that in their suppression still haunt the individuals that have lived them and the country that has ignored them.

Looking at *The Blondes* in the context of generational memories of trauma, this chapter will explore how Carri responds to the representational challenges of an intermediate generation, or one whose memories are "stuck in the middle", through fantasy. After providing contextual background that further explains Argentina's collective trauma in terms of generational approaches, the chapter explores how fantasy acts as a defiant disruption to dominant trauma narratives that exclude Carri's story. This, in turn, creates a space for Carri's story to enter the national discourse of this period. The last section looks specifically at how Carri uses fantasy to capture the intermediacy of her generation as well as the particularities of childhood trauma and growing up with this loss. Through the intermediate mode of fantasy Carri captures the in-between status of her own memories and trauma while unsettling the now familiar stories. Overall her work provokes discussion on how this national trauma affected not just one generation but continues to impact the following generations.

## **5.2 Film Synopsis**

*The Blondes* follows Albertina Carri as she and her crew search for a story that can describe the effects of the disappearance of one generation on those left behind. As the young film crew set out on a journey to interview and find clues for this story, Carri's background is

revealed through her conversations as well as narrations or texts provided by her or the actress Analía Couceyro who plays Carri in the film. These interspersed snippets of story inform how at the age of three, Carri lost her political activist parents to the violent war Argentina's military dictatorship was waging against those it viewed as subversive. In the national narrative created following the fall of the dictatorship, Carri's parents were converted into revolutionary heroes that had taken a stand against what was now viewed as a violent and oppressive regime and gave up their lives in the process.

Carri's experience of the past, however, is different. Carri searches to find and express the story of her parents not as revolutionary heroes but as parents who, in the name of their politics, made a decision that put their family in danger and left their children to grow up in the wake of their loss. In this search, Carri returns to the people, photos, and places that were once associated with her parents. These documents of the past, however, do not provide Carri with the story she needs and are shown in the film as distanced and fragmented pieces that can only provide part of the story. Interviews are cut off or played in the background, photos are blurred or not shown at all, and the places are either inaccessible or dramatically changed from the past. The film chronicles the struggles that Carri encounters in pursuing this project, from lack of material to denied institutional support as well as the personal and societal blocks that prevent or disparage certain memories and their place in collective dialogue. Frustrated with the shortcomings of her sources and societal hindrances, the film becomes a search for the means to fill in the gaps of this story through a performative subjective documentary. Using testimonies from her parents' comrades, readings, re-enactments, animation, texts, her own memories, and self-reflexivity on the whole process, Carri begins to piece together and reflect upon her memories of the loss of her parents and how this has influenced her life.

### 5.3 Context: Living Amidst Legacies of National Trauma

Though it does not seek to revisit the details of Argentina's military dictatorship of 1976-1983 and the "Dirty War" they waged on the nation, Carri's documentary is infused with this history as well as its active legacy in society. The past most present in the film is the traumatic consequences of what the military junta called their "process of national reorganization" (Burucúa, 2009: 1). In this they sought to forcefully return order to a country under increasing economic and political tension that had led to discontented citizens and the rise of guerrilla factions. While this aggressive policy eventually began to bring some protests against the dictatorship, its demise was catalysed by the disastrous defeat of the unpopular 1982 campaign to reclaim the Falkland (Malvinas) Islands from Britain, effectively resulting in the country's return to democracy (Lessa, 2013: 43).

As part of this process, militant political activists such as Carri's parents, as well as those seen as subversive or oppositional, were "disappeared" by the junta; that is, illegally taken, held, tortured, and killed in clandestine holding centres. Family and friends who searched for these individuals were told that they were never taken and sometimes even met with remarks that their leftist sons and daughters had probably run off to join some revolution. In the centres, some just below the very streets of the capital of Buenos Aires, these citizens were tortured with no trial and based off of accusations that could have come from anybody. Official reports put the number of *disappeared* at around 9,000, however, some humanitarian organizations estimate it to be as high as 30,000 (Burucúa, 2009: 1). Organizations such as the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (Mothers of the May Plaza) still fight to find out what happened to their children, where their bodies were left, and also what became of the children that were born while their mothers were being held and given

up for adoption.

Following the fall of the military dictatorship and the return to democracy with the 1983 election of president Raúl Alfonsín, Argentina's Dirty War became a point of public debate (Triquell, 1997). It still holds a prominent place in Argentine culture. Trials of the leading military officials were held and Alfonsín instituted the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP) to investigate the dictatorship's human rights violations, including the disappearances; a process filmed and documented in the 1984 report *Never Again*. These legal proceedings were accompanied by a fervent debate in the public sector allowing family members, activists groups, and artists to contribute to the construction of national narrative. As discussion thrived in the cultural realm, it was hindered in the political realm. Alfonsín faced increasing pressure from the military, still a powerful force in Argentina to end its persecution and as a result Argentina enacted first the The Full Stop Law (1986) followed by the Law of Due Obedience (1987) which put a moratorium on the prosecution of crimes committed during the dictatorship (Triquell, 1997: 63). The processes of political justice were further disrupted as hyperinflation in the late '80s shifted the country's priorities to economic concerns, forcing an early resignation of Alfonsín and the election of Carlos Menem as president.

While the wide deliberation has contributed to restoring the voices to those who have been silenced forever, the pardons and prosecution moratoriums that have been issued and revoked and the trials that continue to be held as administrations change reflect the unsettled position this history continues to hold in society. Further the initial responses that sought to bear witness to the *disappeared* victims did not account for the effects the dictatorship's violence had on other generations. Many of the young children of the *disappeared* would undergo their own trauma of the dictatorship and its haunting legacy

that would come to be addressed after these initial confrontations.

As these children began to come of age in the 1990s, they contributed to a major shift in the representation of this period. Jens Andermann describes this shift through the lens of Argentine cinema, noting how the focus changed from “the establishing of juridical, political truth to its implications in and for the present; that is, a displacement from *historical reconstruction* to the *act of remembrance*, however entangled the one still remains with the other” (2012: 107). It was a less pressing issue to discover what had happened during the dictatorship, though the search for individual stories and bodies continued, but rather the focus now turned to how this past was remembered and how this memory established itself in the present.

In her study of the “post-dictatorship generation”, those who were not adults during the dictatorship such as the children of the *disappeared*, Ana Ros examines how other generations began to question the memory and narratives created following the return to democracy in their search for new understandings of the past (2012). One of the most active voices in this regard was the group H.I.J.O.S.<sup>24</sup> (Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice against Oblivion and Silence). Upon their foundation in 1995, H.I.J.O.S redefined previous narrative’s characterization of the *disappeared* as victims, instead emphasizing their decisive political actions and revolutionary position. Following in their footsteps, this group took up their own political actions. The group became known for the “*escrache*” in which, frustrated with the slow process of justice that allowed known perpetrators of human rights violations to live undisturbed, they would enter the neighbourhood of the perpetrators and, inviting community members to participate, protest in front of their houses. Through their actions the group raised awareness and, in some cases, even inspired

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<sup>24</sup> The acronym “H.I.J.O.S.” in Spanish literally translates to “Sons” or “Children”.

judicial action.

While H.I.J.O.S' active approach challenged previous narratives and created space for new ones, it could not account for each personal experience. Carri herself has never joined the organization as she feels that the personal pain of having lost one's parents is not something easy to share with others (Peña, 2007: 111). By inserting this "new generation in the politics of memory" (Ros, 2012: 29), however, H.I.J.O.S. did create a space in which "other sons and daughters could then explore new ways of relating to their parents' absence and approach activism from a critical perspective" (30). Creating a group for those who wanted to join and offering solidarity and support for children of the *disappeared* to share their experience opened up a space for dialogue regarding the after-effects of the dictatorship. Creative works like Carri's, along with other films also made by children of the *disappeared* such as *(H)Historias cotidianas* (Andrés Habegger, 2000), *Papa Iván* (María Inés Roqué, 2000), and *M* (Nicolás Prividera, 2007) that began to appear in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, represented another push for greater recognition of this generation's experience.<sup>25</sup> The incorporation of this new generation in the debates about the unresolved process of justice showed the on-going effects of this violence beyond just one generation that also demanded a place in the national narrative.

The continual and changing discourse leading up to the release of Carri's film represents a concerted effort to allow national mourning and working through of the trauma. This process, however, still remains collectively unresolved as it created exclusionary narratives that occluded as much as they revealed. *The Blondes* thus addresses a situation of conflicting legacies in which, despite the prominent debate, different voices

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<sup>25</sup> *Historias cotidianas* includes interviews with six children of the *disappeared* while *Papa Iván* and *M* are both documentaries made by the daughter and son respectively of a *disappeared* person reflecting on a lost parent and the experience of the child left behind.



struggle to be heard. As stories are excluded and the pursuit of justice is left unfulfilled, the ghosts of the past remain ever present in society, contributing to a painful irresolution. Carri, in response, approaches these issues in her film by seeking to add her experience to the national discourse. Challenging this still changing narrative with an even more troubled story ultimately leads to the film's use of fantasy as a way to negotiate the intermediacies of this history.

#### **5.4 Unsettling Dominant Narratives**

Produced in a society with a thriving dialogue about the dictatorship and its aftermath, *The Blondes* nevertheless encounters collective silences that do not allow space for diverse generational experiences. Finding its own story out of place in the dominant narrative, the film challenges the discourses that portray her parents and their generation as self-sacrificing heroes and examines what they tell and what they fail to relate. In searching for a place for its story, *The Blondes* disturbs recognized portrayals of the past by using the subversive properties of fantasy. In her fantastic interpretations of the past, Carri exposes the generational discrepancies and politics of memory legacies in a situation that, in creating one narrative, leaves out those in-between.

The generational politics involved in constructing narratives of the past play a major part in the development of *The Blondes*. In the film they threaten to eclipse the experience of Carri and her generation. This prospect is almost fulfilled when Carri and her crew receive a letter from the National Institute of Cinema and Audio-visual Arts (INCAA) announcing that this significant Argentine funding institution will not support the proposed format of Carri's film. The crew gather in one of the bedrooms used as a meeting point for this low-budget production and crowd around as the decision from the institution that holds

the fate of their film in its hands is read aloud. Their hopes are met with disappointment and frustration. The letter states that though Carri's project fictionalizes her experiences, it nevertheless requires more personal testimonies from her parents' comrades and "greater documentary rigour" as, they conclude, Carri's parents, because of their tragic destiny, "deserve that this work is made". The crew's ensuing discussion highlights the generational gap between their project as one focusing on a generation of child survivors and the project about their parents that INCAA wants. They point out that some of the signatories are themselves activists from the dictatorship period who predictably are focusing on the importance of their comrades' story and not that of the daughter left behind.

While INCAA appears in the film through a faceless mandate, it is Carri's generation who is present in the film. They receive their fate from a larger cultural institution making decisions behind closed doors, and yet they are the ones shown discussing how to continue asserting their position that is overshadowed by an unseen power and its version of the past. Carri responds to her friends that though recognizing the previous generation's need to tell their story, she does not want to, nor is it her place, to bear witness to their account as she must focus on testifying to her own experience. The crew support her and decide to continue with the film as planned.

In a search for a listener that will acknowledge her story, Carri finds that the pre-set narratives of the past leave no space for her story. INCAA does not listen to Carri's story because it does not advance the readily recognized traumatic narratives of her parents', and INCAA's, generation. In this framework, it is Carri's role is to be the unquestioning daughter of the *disappeared*. Carri's interviews with her parents' friends and family are equally frustrating. In these she hopes to find out about her parents' familial as opposed to political life but these stories are always hindered in some way or another. Carri

finds that when her family is interviewed, her parents are “converted into two exceptional people; beautiful, intelligent”; when she talks to her parents’ comrades, the story becomes a “political analysis”. Shaped by their own fantasies and the emphasis on her parents as sacrificial political heroes who should be the centre of the story, these perspectives do not provide a space to hear Carri’s story.

As Carri highlights, what she encounters is a society in which her parents’ generation overshadows those that follow. INCAA’s statement that Carri’s parents, not Carri, are the ones who “deserve that this work is made” demonstrate the generational conflict and the resulting hierarchy of memories. In this hierarchy the dictatorship generation of Carri’s parents serves as the ultimate narrative of suffering, subsequently diminishing that of other generations. Within this structure there are clearly defined roles, exemplified by groups such as the Madres and Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo (Mothers and Grandmothers of the May Plaza) and H.I.J.O.S. (Children) who even in their names define themselves in relation to the lost generation. As a result it is Carri’s living story that still seems out of place in the country’s narrative that emphasizes the voices of those who are gone.

This hierarchy is reinforced by the idea that Carri’s experiences and memories are not the first person accounts, but rather the secondary, or post, experience of this period. This can be seen in some of the labelling of Carri and her generation as “postgenerations” and their memories as “postmemories” (Nouzeilles, 2005; Ros, 2012). These definitions, especially Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” which informs the study of the passing on and new life of traumatic memories to generations that come after (Hirsch, 2008, 2012), do not fully describe this situation. Here the case differs as the generation that comes after are not reliving their own version of what happened to their parents but rather have their own specific experienced trauma and memories. Further postmemory does not

function in this situation as the rupture of the family that occurred during this period results in the inability to fulfil the original conditions of postmemory. Postmemory relies on the “living connection” between family members (the survivors) who share these memories with those who were not there (Hirsch, 2012: 104). Carri, as a descendant of the *disappeared*, has no living connection with this past and thus troubles this theorization of generational memory transmission. Carri is not living hearing her parents’ memories but rather living with a lack of their presence and ability to transmit their past.

Carri is distanced from the dominant narratives of the *disappeared* that society upholds and seeks to perpetuate as they do not take into account her story of these people as parents. The stories that are told are also removed as they are of people she did not know as she lost them as a child. This distance is felt during the scenes in which she does try to revive this connection with the previous generation and learn stories about her parents from family and friends. These interactions inevitably highlight the gap between their different experiences of the past. The film’s interviews themselves are displayed in a detached manner that underscores this feeling. First it is the actress playing Carri rather than Carri herself who conducts them, negating the live connection between the interviewee and Carri. This practice common to documentaries is shaken as the basic format of the witness relating to the listener (either on or off screen) is interrupted by the actor that comes between the witness and the listener. Instead of a direct exchange, the interviews become a performance of the struggle to bear witness to the disconnected past. The interviews are further disoriented as they are not given direct attention and never shown in full. The scenes are either abruptly ended or the interviews are shown playing in the background as Carri (Couceyro) continues with her work. Carri goes ahead creating her own story, aware of the past and its persistent presence but not letting it overwhelm her own story.

*The Blondes* deconstructs dominant narratives to question the incomplete picture they present and perpetuate. The film also uses fantasy to challenge their dominance by subverting; exposing their construction as well as the fantastic elements these portrayals of history also possess. Though not always recognized, there is an element of fantasy in creating national narratives of the past. Andreas Huyssen notes in the memory work of Argentina and Chile that within the impulse to “create public spheres of ‘real’ memory that will counter the politics of forgetting pursued by post dictatorship regimes”, there is not always a clear division between the real and mythic past; “the real can be mythologized just as the mythic may engender strong reality effects” (2000: 26). Even on the collective level memory is also performed and blurs the past to be somewhere in-between historical events and their lived return. Narratives are constructed on memories that have their own organic life in which they are shaped by time, outside influences, and the individual and society’s way of relating to a past. As such, the real and the mythic become intermingled in the presentation of the past. *The Blondes* points to this blurring of the real and the mythic in the intermediate space of fantasy as it appears in all facets of this memory’s construction and thus opens it to more critical examination.

The film’s scenes that consist of animated intertitles question the intermingling of the real and the mythic in depictions of the past by troubling recognized discourses and reflecting on the generational effects of the Dirty War. In the film’s six textual insertions, the words move across a white background to appear as if floating. The transitory nature of the text at once creates a sensory world as the words come alive and yet at the same time destabilizes this world by showing its manipulation. The white background upon which the text is inscribed elicits the image of a book’s white page and the sense of authority that the written word can claim, especially in film. Written text in film has developed from an

expression of individual voice (dialogue on intertitle cards in silent films) to an authoritative voice (“unbiased facts” presented as written text in fiction and nonfiction films) expressing dominant narratives.

The use of text in *The Blondes*, however, questions this authority. Shown as something moving and changing, these scenes highlight the malleability of text as it is created to tell a story. The audio in these scenes also facilitates and troubles the presumed power of the written word. Presented as disjointed from the scene, the background noises interrupt and disturb the silence. The muffled voices and whistling wind do not correspond with the text, making the scene unsettling. Carri thus troubles the authoritative position of text by playing with it, animating it to show that it too is alive and cannot be taken for granted by the reader/viewer. Unsettling the place of power the text holds in film defamiliarizes it so as to question its structures and sources, leading Carri to ultimately challenge the authority of the official written documents and their stories of the country’s (hi) story.

The film takes two official texts, the investigative report *Never Again* and the dictatorship’s pronounced policy towards subversives,<sup>26</sup> and questions their authority by presenting them within this unsettling and in-between space. As they are moved and interrupted, thus defying the documentary practice of static texts, these words are presented using a different set of rules that place them in the realm of the fantastic. Animating these texts that have held power at different times, Carri not only takes control of them but questions their stories and their dominance. If left unchallenged, these narratives can lead

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<sup>26</sup> *Nunca Más (Never Again)* was the official report put out by the CONADEP (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons) in 1984 that chronicles the investigation of the violence carried out by the military during the Dirty War. Lessa notes that while the report ultimately condemns the military repression, the prologue to the report refers to terror committed by both the extreme right and extreme left presenting what Lessa calls a “classic exposition of the two demons narrative” and showing that at the point of investigation there was still a reluctance and silence regarding condemnation of the government (2013: 106).

to violence as their narrative is promoted at the expense of others. While the power the word of the dictatorship held has been demystified by the change in politics and revelation of the violence enforced to enact these words, *The Blondes* shows that even now celebrated texts like *Never Again* are not immune to analysis.

The film quotes a section in the report that mentions the fact that the disappearance of Roberto Carri and Ana María Caruso left behind three daughters. What this statement in the report fails to do, however, is go further as to examine what this actually signified in terms of the lives of the unnamed daughters. Again, the disappeared generation are the protagonists whose stories (also partial) fill the pages of this report while what this signified for others is omitted from its pages. Even when used as evidence in a film about the children, the stories that are recorded cannot provide any information on what happened to those left behind. Official reports like *Never Again* may provide an important document, especially to be used in cases of legal retribution, but they do not provide an avenue to expressing the experience of those lost and those still present. The prominent position of this report in society at once creates a need for alternative narratives that explore the missing stories yet at the same time challenges their development by dictating the framework in which they should be expressed.

Though *The Blondes* addresses this gap by creating a space to explore individual experiences, it shows that these experiences can be questioned as well. The autobiographical memories of the film demonstrate the unstable ground upon which personal history is built. Just as official texts move through white space of the screen, so do personal texts. One highlights the musings of a child who imagined herself as “the child of King Solomon, of Rasputin, of Mata Hari, and nothing”, finally concluding that “in the end, I was my parents’ daughter”. This text articulates a childhood fantasy while also being

presented within an ungrounded fantastic space. The origins of the text are unidentified in the film, making the text at once individual and universal. With no introduction or citation, the text is positioned in the film as part of Carri's story and yet, even with the congruencies and influences it could have on Carri, the written word is officially not hers. The real author, Olga Orozco, is not cited until the credits and the text appears in the film as if Carri's voice. This text thus again questions authorial power even in subjective cases and reminds that they too share and are shaped by other narratives.

Through the personal text scenes, Carri undermines the subjective position by playing with it and hiding the first person author. Carri furthers this by undermining her own subjective account by framing the film in fantasy. Starting and ending with animated textual sequences of the credits provides cause to reflect on the authority of even this information. The film's production cannot be denied as the names are shown in the credits text, yet seeing the names involved in the filming only reveals part of the story. These entities themselves are not taken for granted as givens and come with their own past and motives that are influenced by and shape the story. As she ungrounds these names and information in a moving text challenges the narrative of her own story. From the beginning until the end, Carri highlights that her work is not an authoritative picture of the experience of the dictatorship but rather its own interpretation of the past that falls between narratives. In these textual scenes, *The Blondes* demonstrates how the subjective, even in Carri's case, constitutes its own state of fantasy in its instability and intermediacy that becomes even more pronounced as it is influenced by and incorporated into a larger collective memory.

As individual and collective memories are blurred, the film continues questioning the authority of certain narratives that are themselves constructed under the auspices of multiple experiences that place them in the in-between. The last text that appears on the



screen, uninterrupted and in-between scenes, states, “If all the world could be like this, like memories, I would love all humanity, I would die for it with pleasure.” This last quote, which is only cited in the credits as coming from Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, plays with the idea of memories and their idealization. As it floats across the screen, the film brings to question the merits of giving the definitive word to idyllic images, like the heroism of the disappeared, that are limiting and fantastic. The memories that *The Blondes* finds are much more complicated than a single image to uphold and are mixed with conflicting portrayals and emotions.

This questioning of memory itself is important as all the discourses about this trauma in the film show to be built upon the unstable foundations of shifting memories. Walker notes the instability of traumatic memory and how that influences representation by describing how “the practice of history is frustrated by the transience of evidence, by the subjectivity of individual memory, and by the realization, as other voices are heard from, that historiography is intrinsically interpretive” (2005: xvii). The film encounters these frustrations and paradoxes in memory as it is propelled by an abundance of memory even though over and over again those interviewed, from Carri’s neighbours to Carri herself, repeat “I don’t remember anything.” These memories, however, are subjective and influenced by idealized images or, as Carri remarks in her case, “diffuse and contaminated”. The notion of the beautiful, single memory, then, is dispelled by not only the manipulation of the quote, but the manipulation of memories that make up the film. The world is not and cannot be one perfect memory as these are unstable and unresolved, contradicting each other and creating silences that leave the wounds of the past open.

The conflicted memories of the past, containing a strange mixture of beauty and violence, physically haunt the country and the spaces in the film. This is seen through the

text scenes which, as Gonzalo Aguilar describes, are “haptic images” which “work with the dialectic of near and far, of image and nature, of visual deception and tactile verification” and as such appear “as though in the face of the distance of visual memory, these stories were conceding a moment of pure sensation and fusion with their object (memory itself)” (2008: 157). While the textual memories themselves are tactile, Carri’s film furthers this physical interaction with memory by visiting the spaces of her past. In the film Carri returns to the sites that have shaped her past, most notably the childhood home she shared with her parents before they were disappeared and the countryside where she lived after their disappearance. These sites, however, are *Unheimlich* as they carry the opposing memories of the life and loss of family that once lived there. Not only do the places of the past hold troubled memories, but the return of Carri and her crew to these places disturbs them even further. Their entrance into her old neighbourhood is marked by a feeling of displacement mirroring her original entrance into the place as a child. Both she and her crew, trailing their equipment and notably middle class, stand out in this working class neighbourhood just as her parents, with their “blonde” hair and typewriters, once did. They are met with closed doors and suspicion. They conduct one interview with a woman standing in her doorway (with the crew behind the fence), giving a few details of the Carri’s time there but reluctant to open the door to this past and to the incongruous film crew asking questions about it.

The threatening feeling that haunts this place is magnified when the one neighbour eager to be interviewed suggests that she was the one who pointed the police to the Carris’ house when her parents were taken. She casually drops this piece of information into her chatter, unbothered by the potential consequences that her actions could have carried. Surrounded by her family and home, she stands in contrast to Carri who has lost her home

and family, a contrast further emphasized by her suggestions that the Carris never belonged.

Unwelcome by others, Carri herself is physically detached from this place. When the crew returns to Carri's house, it is to stand as strangers looking in, barred from entrance. Outside the house they film a scene in which Couceyro playing Carri recounts her memories of the neighbourhood, such as when she and her sister were forcefully taken into a car to be questioned by police about their parents. Already dissociated through its performance, this memory is further perturbed as it is interrupted by the passing traffic and the revelation that she doesn't know if this is her memory or that constructed by others. Standing outside her house does not offer a glimpse into the created space in which she lived with her family, nor do these places of indexical importance even rekindle her memories of the past as it is now, and perhaps always was, unfamiliar.

By playing with and questioning the personal and collective narratives that shape each other and the country's history and memory, Carri highlights the problem of only leaving space for the construction of one exclusive narrative. This generates a conflict as subsequent generations must find a space in-between recognized histories to assert their own experiences. By deconstructing these dominant discourses and constructing alternative ones that include her and her generation's story, *The Blondes* exposes and explores the need for a more open public dialogue as Argentina continues to investigate not just the immediate effects of the Dirty War but also how it continues to shape the nation and its people.

## **5.5 Producing a Testimonial Space**

In searching for her story, Albertina Carri is not only looking for the lost memories of her

childhood, but for a space to express them in a culture that has suppressed them. Ignoring these stories leaves Carri and her generation “stuck in the middle” (*The Blondes*), looking for new ways to represent the intermediate status of childhood trauma and for a place to insert their stories in the cracks of the collective memory. Carri’s story in *The Blondes* challenges dominant narratives while also calling attention to the need for a space to explore the distinct experience and unsettled position of Carri and other child survivors of the dictatorship. This generation inhabits an unstable in-between position that resembles what literary scholar Susan Rubin Suleiman calls in relation to Holocaust child survivors “generation 1.5” (2002). Suleiman uses this term to distinguish the particular trauma undergone by a generation that experiences trauma during its formative years, an occurrence generating its own particular issues that can often be overshadowed by surviving older generations.

This experience is also influenced by the “generational collapse”, a term used by psychoanalyst and psychologist Suzanne Kaplan in her study of child survivors of the Holocaust and Rwandan genocide to describe the specific traumatization of children losing the connection to the previous generation (*Children in Genocide: Extreme Traumatization and Affect Regulation*, 2008). Kaplan looks at how this collapse is not only marked by the physical loss of a generation but by the destruction of the bonds and space in which history, culture, and traditions are passed down between generations. Its interruption leads to complex recurring ramifications of trauma that continue to haunt a group beyond the event itself as well as distinct generational experiences as those who are/were children encounter unique issues regarding identity formation or expressing their experiences in spaces that do not privilege these stories. Though this manifests differently for each individual, this situation creates a distinct generational experience that needs space to be explored.

In continuing to challenge the official history, Carri uses fantasy as a way to produce space to bear witness to her narrative and its own precarious position as a story of generation 1.5. These memories of the past and their incursion on the present, as well as the paradoxes of individual experiences that are influenced and part of a larger collective experience of trauma, produce a narrative that is nonlinear and liminal. By creating a world that itself is between worlds and narratives, fantasy facilitates Carri's presentation of her memories that are intermediary through a storyline and space that are grounded in the real and yet break the understood rules of this world to enter an unsettled, fantasy state. Through animations, re-enactments, and other diverse expressions of memory, Carri explores the multifaceted and unsettled aspects of her experience and shows that in order to access and understand these experiences, there must be a departure from the known world/narratives into a more uncertain space governed by different rules that constitutes the fantasy of this film. While not presenting itself as a recognizable fairy tale or journey into a world of magic, *The Blondes* presents fantasy as a hesitation which, according to Todorov, occurs when a person familiar with the world as governed by the rules of nature encounters something that transgresses those rules (1975). Carri's memories and her presentation of them transgress these rules and lead to the film's fantasy.

Estranged from dominant narratives and iconic spaces that have come to represent the violence of the dictatorship, *The Blondes* looks to the liminal spaces of fantasy to create and share its stories. While Carri chronicles her frustrated forays into the past in Buenos Aires, she finds that it is her return to the countryside, where she and her sisters lived after their parents were disappeared and which she describes as a "place of fantasy", referring to this in-between space it offers her, that conjures up her memories and gives her the tools to display them. Carri's return to the past is embodied by the actress Couceyro who is

shown cutting out pictures over a table covered with photos and Playmobil figures, a child concentrated on putting together the project of her life. In accessing and depicting this childhood memory, Carri reverts to the fantasy and play in which children learn to interact with the world by negotiating the world they see and their experiences of it. Though grounded in the real, this experience of the world is underscored by the elements of the unreal and the imaginary that shape its portrayal.

Using fantasy as a way to testify to her experience, Carri captures an emotional reality of her trauma as opposed to the more logic based or “documentary rigorous” story that is expected of her. What Carri finds, though, is that relying on the rational is not always an option for her and can also be problematic as it presents its own contradictions and manipulations. Interviewing her parents’ friends and family, Carri attempts to gather pieces for her film. None, however, are satisfactory as these accounts bear witness to the dominant narratives, leaving her with the need to find something that can challenge this absence and help her narrate her experience. Of the interviews she conducts, the one that most intrigues Carri is that with her six-year-old nephew in which he proclaims that he will kill those who murdered his mother’s parents. The emotional approach displayed in her nephew’s reaction to this history intrigues Carri as it represents the unadulterated feelings rather than the contaminated stories of her trauma. Despite Carri’s interest, her sister denies her permission to film the little boy’s passionate responses and thus guard the child. The child’s ability to contribute to collective discourses as well as the validity of these reactions are downgraded in society which can dismiss this form of reaction and the means used to represent it.

Incorporating the emotional rather than logical explanations in narratives, however, is a significant component in representing childhood trauma. In thinking about childhood trauma and her own experience growing up as a child of Holocaust survivors, Eva Hoffman

notes how emotional understanding supersedes the rational when describing how memories of trauma are approached in a specific way by children. Hoffman says, “while the adult world asks first ‘what happened’, and from there follows its uncertain and sometimes resistant route towards the inward meaning of the facts, those who are born after calamity sense its most inward meanings first and have to work their way outwards toward the facts and the worldly shape of events” (2005: 16). Both offering viable approaches, the child’s approach in a world dominated by adults tends to come more under scrutiny, leaving the narration based on inward meaning questionable.

Though not coming after the event, Carri’s search for a story that can reflect her experience shows interest in the inward meaning of events reflected in her childhood memories as opposed to starting with the question of “what happened” outwardly. The emotions of these memories become her story as they are the meanings she first had of this past. Further, in terms of a past still shrouded in mystery and lack of confirmed details about “what happened”, representing inward meanings is as certain as representing outward meanings. Rather than present the linear order of events that make up her life, Carri turns to the fantastic to explore the emotional traumas of a child in transition under the auspices of violence.

This return is facilitated and defamiliarized through Playmobil animations that serve to represent a lost space and her experience of it. The animations are fulfilled in a fantastic space that contains the narrative of the real as well as the interpretations and recreations that defamiliarize these stories. These spaces in particular allow Carri to make visible the parts of her past that lack images, namely her familial narrative. The animated depictions of happy moments like family BBQs or traumatic events such as the government’s disappearing of her parents, at once provide a means to capture Carri’s

experience, while also highlighting the unsettled nature of this search. Despite a large number of animated and/or self-reflexive documentaries, the use of dolls to tell history still interrupts the documentary mode and its claims to “*the* world” by reminding that this representation is also constructed and thus has elements of “*a* world” as well. This portrayal is further disturbing as it also unsettles the narrative that portrays Carri’s parents solely as political activists who lost their lives selflessly fighting for their beliefs. Like Carri’s animated texts scenes that unsettle the foundations upon which all stories, including her own, are built, these animated scenes further disturb the documentary narrative by highlighting its constructed and interpretive nature. The fantastic space Carri creates to explore her experience, then, is continually unsettled and unsettling as this past is still haunted and unresolved.

The disturbing nature that is cast over these familiar spaces both returns visibility to these scenes while also reminding the filmmakers and audience of their loss. The scenes and people that are no longer there have been replaced by unnatural substitutes: dolls with perpetual smiles painted on their static faces that move around pools and barbeques to the sound of recorded laughter echoing. Further they are haunted by the underlying knowledge that these scenes have been precluded from Carri’s life by the loss of her home and parents. This loss complicates Carri’s attempts to find her own story as she does not have access to and must therefore recreate parts of the domestic realm that can testify to her story.

In his study of “domestic ethnographies”, Michael Renov highlights the importance of turning to the family to aid in the path to self-knowledge (2004: 218). This turn to the domestic as a formative place and therefore a place that holds clues to self-discovery is important to Carri as she tries to reconcile with her identity as the daughter of the disappeared. Yet this turn is ultimately challenged as she cannot film her parents. Though



the animations allow Carri to reintegrate the story of their domestic role, Carri recreates a narrative which has been lost not only through their disappearance but through the conversion of their story into one solely interested in their political identities. In re-animating this narrative, Carri embarks on the path of self-discovery that Renov describes as she investigates how family, and its rupture, has shaped her.

The narrative of domesticity that the dolls represent is further perturbed as these childhood play toys are used to not only represent the happy memories of the familial past but the painful and violent ones as well. Carri uses animation to depict the abduction of her parents, an event she did not witness yet which nonetheless made an impressionable mark on the rest of her life. In this scene, the figurines are shown in a car pulling up at a gas station and being abducted by a UFO. The image of their still smiling plastic bodies being sucked up into a space ship is accompanied by the music of Bernard Hermann's soundtrack to the classic Hollywood science fiction film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951) undercut by the sound of a scream. There is no introduction or voiceover explaining the scene and what it means to Carri. Instead it relies on the references to the terror of these science fiction films that convey fear of a more powerful unknown impossible to represent. Palpable here are the more sinister aspects of fantasy that draw it closer to, rather than letting it escape from, representing (childhood) trauma. In the absence of witnesses and documentation, Carri focuses less on representing the event itself and more on her perception of this violent event that comes to haunt her. Though the loss of her parents did not unfold in this manner, it is something that happened but seems so otherworldly that its implications can only be understood through fantasy.

Even in a film framed in fantasy, this scene stands out in its use of science fiction tropes that, while on the one hand fantastic, also threaten to enter another realm altogether.

Science fiction can disrupt and depart from fantasy as instead of maintaining an uncertainty between worlds, as Todorov requires in his definition of fantasy (1975), science fiction loses the connection with this world when it enters a wholly other world. Janet Walker in *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust* also highlights science fiction's position outside of fantasy by placing it as a greater outlier on her continuum of fantasy and documentary (2005: 24). Pushing the limits of fantasy in this scene, however, is essential in examining the world shattering impact of this trauma in which ties to this world are so forcefully tested that they are almost, but not quite, severed. Though mediated through dolls, movies, and science fiction, at the heart of this scene is still the painful link to reality that is the story of the disappearance of Carri's parents and its effects on the family.

After the adults are abducted, those that are left behind are the three blonde child dolls (Carri and her two "blonde" sisters) surveying the scene of the crime. The return to these children, even through the mediation of dolls and fantasy, is a point of reflection on the inability to rationalize this reality, which makes its consequences and effects on Carri's identity no less real. Unsettling of dominant narratives, and even of the fantastic ones, this scene functions to highlight the tenuous relationship between worlds and the extent of the journey Carri must embark upon to navigate between them as she searches for a way to convey her story.

Bordering on the edges of fantasy, this scene underscores the unsettling nature of the dolls. Jordana Blejmar argues that as "playful memories" embodied through the dolls shed new meaning on traumatic memories, these toys become "desacralized" (Blejmar, 2013) as they lose their presumed innocence to instead be used to testify stories of trauma. According to Blejmar an act that occurs throughout the film in which all dictated or

“sacred” narratives are questioned, the kidnapping scene in particular demonstrates the “potentiality of toys to manipulate experience and their nightmarish, *unheimlich* nature” (Blejmar, 2013: 51). The evocation of the *Unheimlich* underscores the overall unease characterized by the manipulation and re-appropriation of toys and play that contributes to creating the story’s sense of discomfort. This unsettling nature is not only from Carri’s story itself with its own unimaginable features but from the disturbing place it occupies in the collective narrative.

This playful and yet uneasy aspect is further developed in the film’s re-enactments that serve as another device for Carri to revisit the past and explore her experience. Again these scenes are not used to answer the question of “what happened” but rather to shed light on the emotional experiences that combine the past and present. The actress Couceyro plays the blondes from the past by donning a blonde wig and appearing, as a ghost from the past, in Carri’s old neighbourhood. This re-enactment does not capture a particular “what happened” of the past, Couceyro walks down deserted streets and settles in an empty playground, but rather establishes her presence. This presence, however, is not necessarily that of either Carri or her parents, but is rather a performance of them that is coloured by the myths and memories in which they now exist. A living spectre brought to life through multiple layers of memories, this figure has a haunting presence in both Carri’s narrative as well as the neighbourhood that it drifts through, still out of place and unwelcome.

Couceyro’s re-enactment as the blonde mirrors the form of re-enactment that Carri and her crew undertake by returning to Carri’s old neighbourhood. Though they are playing themselves, through their return the crew both voluntarily and involuntarily brings back the ghosts of Carri’s parents and their generation. Even without the wigs, Carri and her crew become “the blondes” as they are the outsiders, both in the neighbourhood and in the

country, and their story is still overshadowed by the past. At the same time, they break from this past by appropriating through re-enactments their own leading role in this story.

In the film's final scene, the crew visits the countryside, Carri's site of remembrance, and all dress up in blonde wigs. Their participation in a facetious re-enactment resembles children playing at dress up rather than one of serious transformation. This light-heartedness, however, reflects the feelings of comfort and solidarity that the crew have gained through this project, allowing them to form an alternative family that will be the protagonists of a new story. It is this way of critiquing the past and yet looking to a new future, even when masked in "frivolity", that makes the film according to Ana Amado "the most political of the documentary films on the disappeared--not only because it works on memory but also because it puts forth the possibilities of making a community with the signs of the present" (Cited in Aguilar, 2008: 163). Carri and her crew in their costumes set out from the house, walking towards the sunrise on the horizon and their dawning future.

The appropriation of the position of the titular blondes from her parents asserts this film as one not about the dictatorship generation but rather about Carri and her generation and the unique struggles and solidarities that they will form. These are struggles that still have an uncertain future and are overshadowed by the past. Yet they are also negotiating that future and the path that will take them there. While contributing to the impetus towards working through traumatic memory and moving forward, this ending nevertheless underscores that this work is not fulfilled as the past is still unstable, the future unclear, and Carri, her generation, and her country are somewhere in-between.

This intermediate position of the film and its open conclusion is further highlighted in two unsettling points following this scene. By ending the film with a final textual fantasy

sequence that plays with the end credits, Carri reminds the audience that her film is also built on unstable ground, questionable and unresolved. As the credits continue, it is revealed that the film has received support from INCAA. Though Carri's film has fought the dominant narrative in order to find a place for her story and trauma, it is nevertheless linked to this narrative and the institutions and society that it forms. Carri's experience and her film, as such, are somewhere in the middle of national discourse as it is at once rejected by society yet embraced by it.

Through her play with the past, Carri breaks the ruling order of the dominant narrative in order to testify to her experience. Focusing on the new, or alternative, narratives that are created through these representations, Carri positions her own personal narrative as something that is part of a larger generational challenge to the narrative impetus that asks for the post dictatorship generation to relive their parents' generation. While navigating through this troubled space, Carri is able to confront and piece together aspects of her own experience that have been ignored in national narratives but that are essential in her own personal narrative. In this process she reclaims her space in a larger narrative that has assigned and overlooked her position as she experiences it. By creating a space to testify to her experience, Carri also creates the space in which society needs to bear witness to her story in the testimonial exchange. While her story and its insertion into the national narrative may still be developing and disturbing. Carri positions herself as part of this narrative and nation that in their negotiation between the past and present take into account the multiple generations and effects that this process encompasses.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

Despite Argentina's prominent discussion about the past,<sup>27</sup> this piece of Argentina's history, however, still remains unresolved as the process of creating an official discourse ultimately silences other parts of this experience still waiting to be addressed. Inserting her story into this dialogue through documentary fantasy, Albertina Carri disrupts the official discourse to question its shortcomings that have overshadowed her story and those of others. While doing so, Carri also bears witness to her own trauma as well as possibilities of distinct generational experiences of a past that still affects those left behind.

Reflecting this collective irresolution, *The Blondes* does not offer conclusions or solutions but instead maintains the uncertainty of fantasy until the very end. Starting and ending with the animated textual sequences that frame the film in fantasy, Carri's work destabilizes authoritative accounts (even when it comes to her own authority) and rather opens history up to a spectrum of experiences. To do so, part of her struggle is revealing the unstable ground upon which dominant narratives are built. *The Blondes'* fragmented interviews, animated texts, and undermining of authority all serve to show that this authoritative position is also a constructed picture of the world cobbled together from multiple influences and interpretations. In destabilizing dominant narratives and questioning the silences they generate, Carri creates room for her own story that, while unresolved, also demands a space to be presented and processed. In exploring her position, Carri highlights the precarity of a narrative that is built on unstable memories and multiple influences. Despite its liminality that is highlighted through the fantastic representations of animation, re-enactments, and focus on inward meanings, this nevertheless depicts an

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<sup>27</sup> Aside from the dictatorship being a repeated subject in films and books, in society the *Mothers of the May Plaza* continue to be active and politically involved (especially with the presidencies of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and then Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015)). Trials were re-opened and several were held under Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (Ros, 2012).

experience that also is part of the national narrative.

Though challenging to the collective, the film's success and celebration as an exemplar piece of trauma narrative by societal institutions and academia, as seen by its final support from INCAA and its appearance not only in individual articles but as part of larger works on Argentine cinema such as Gonzalo Aguilar's *Other Worlds: New Argentine Film* (2008) and Joanna Page's *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema* (2005), shows that it is nevertheless part of it. This incorporation was fortified as surrounding its release new institutional discourses of the experience of the following generations were beginning to be formed as children of the *disappeared* began to make more personal pieces that questioned their parents and looked for new understandings of the period (see Ros, 2012). As these queries became more publicized and frequent, there was a marked shift in creating new narratives of the trauma that could include stories from Carri's generation. Coming out in a time in which there was a marked transition between narratives, *The Blondes* negotiates between these discourses by challenging the dominant one of the past and working to create a new one in the present. This journey in the intermediary is carried out through the fantasy that, in spite of and through its subversion, works through worlds in transition to create space for and express the intermediary experience of Carri, her generation, and her nation.

## Chapter 6: *The Missing Picture*: Uncovering Buried Memories and Missing Pictures

### 6.1 Introduction

“Overnight I became ‘new people,’ or (according to an even more horrible expression) an ‘April 17.’ Millions of us are so designated. That date becomes my registration number, the date of my birth into the proletarian revolution. The history of my childhood is abolished. Forbidden. From that day on, I, Rithy Panh, thirteen years old, have no more history, no more family, no more emotions, no more thoughts, no more unconscious. Was there a name? Was there an individual? There’s nothing anymore” (Panh, 2012: 23).

In *The Missing Picture* Rithy Panh confronts the difficulty of telling a story that has had its evidence removed from history. This confrontation is a personal journey for Panh as he is recalling and sharing his past. It also contributes to a collective process in which Panh counters the gaps in history left by the Khmer Rouge and the nation’s silences surrounding this past to open up and share the suppressed history of his nation. Panh uses fantasy to relate and reflect upon his and his nation’s history and draws attention to the continuing need to re-examine pasts that have remained silent and missing.

The entrance of the Khmer Rouge army into Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975 is a life-changing event that Rithy Panh revisits in *The Missing Picture*. As the narrator describes this momentous occasion, the film shows figurines inhabiting faded photos of an empty, evacuated city. The images continue to show pictures of deserted homes, left in a state of disarray with food still on the tables, and finally transitions to a filmed image of the deserted and broken city. The narrator comments how the purity of the revolution had “no room for humans” and only after they had been taken out of the picture and sent to their new re-assigned locations, could the Khmer Rouge film Phnom Penh.

In their ascendance to power, the Khmer Rouge not only physically occupied the capital city and then the country, but attempted to exert total control over people’s personal



space as well. The regime denied people's past, renamed them, and set about creating a new world order in which they dictated dress, language, family structure, and actions (Hamilton 2013b; Kiernan, 1997; Short, 2004). To undertake this process, residents of the capital city were immediately removed and transported to rural camps where they would be re-educated in the old ways. Cambodia's displaced population would become the new people of the Khmer Rouge's utopia. In his book on Pol Pot, Philip Short describes the first days of the regime and its radical changes as follows, "'Pol's aim was to plunge the country into an inferno of revolutionary change where, certainly, old ideas and those who refused to abandon them would perish in the flames, but from which Cambodia itself would emerge, strengthened and purified, as a paragon of communist virtue. The goal was not to destroy but to transmute'" (2004: 288). Taking away people's homes, families, names, and previous identities, the Khmer Rouge created a state of control in which they obliterated the past, dictated the present, and sought to sculpt a new future.

Despite the Khmer Rouge's best efforts to occupy the land and history of a country and its people, the past could not be made to disappear. Both during and after the reign of the Khmer Rouge, the people and their memories came back to haunt the new worlds being created. As such, the Khmer Rouge's violent acquisition of power and subsequent rule did not represent a seamless transition from one world to another. Instead, the Khmer Rouge's legacy is of a people caught between worlds in which the past, although repressed, is forever present.

The confrontation with this past has slowly come about in Cambodian society, aided by projects such as Rithy Panh's documentaries. In films such as *Site 2* (1989), *Bophana*, *une tragédie cambodgienne* (1996), and *S-21, la machine de mort Khmère rouge* (S-21:

*The Khmer Rouge Death Machine*, 2003) Panh revisits the spaces and people that were transformed and made infamous during the Khmer Rouge's reign. In doing so, Panh contributes to the process of bringing these stories to light. The Khmer Rouge's reign of terror and still unofficially recognized genocide carried out through their total and violent occupation of the space of Cambodia haunts Panh's films. As Panh addresses this past in his films, he uses the power of space to evoke and stand as a witness for those murdered by the Khmer Rouge. Thus, as Annette Hamilton describes, Panh has created a "cinema of witness" (2013: 8). *The Missing Picture* further carries out this cinema of witnessing by restoring voice (Torchin, 2014), but also by using space as a way to approach the past. After so many years of using the camera to record and open up to critical examination the country's past, in *The Missing Picture*, Panh turns the camera onto himself and his memories of this past.

In attempting to resurrect these stories, Panh finds himself encountering the difficulties of sharing an experience that is characterized by his own repression, hauntings, and lack of corroborative testimony. Not only are most of the photos, movies, and other personal artefacts that portray his life before the Khmer Rouge destroyed, but the photographs of his and others experience under the Khmer Rouge are also missing. Furthermore, the physical spaces that might offer some clues and bear witness to his past are also absent. These spaces have been so dramatically altered that they no longer reflect his experience. For example, his childhood home has changed so much that he doesn't even visit it, while the villages and labour camps no longer resemble the spaces he inhabited. Finally, Panh himself is distanced from his own story. He is making a film about his childhood from the position of a middle-aged man living in exile, and as such must bridge a temporal and physical divide.

In light of these obstacles, Panh seeks alternative routes to approach and represent the past. In *The Missing Picture*, Panh uses fantasy to provide a means to reimage the past, illustrate how the past returns eternally to haunt the present, explore the influence of the present on the retelling of the past, and emphasize the ambiguities between the imaginary and the real. The film's use of fantasy thus negotiates between the past and the present as it tells of Panh's experience and survival of the Khmer Rouge and also his present experience of living with these memories. As seen in Carri's story, fantasy has a double role. The use of fantasy disrupts dominant narratives, like the Khmer Rouge's narrative of the past and the silence that followed their deposition, while also creating a space and means to relate variant experiences.

Bearing witness to a history of erased evidence and silenced memories in *The Missing Picture*, Panh uses fantasy to remember, represent, and share the stories that remain unaddressed and unresolved for him and his country. This chapter examines how fantasy in the film serves to counter the silence, borne out of the lack of anecdotal testimony and documentary records, surrounding the period. In *The Missing Picture*, fantasy creates a space for the examination of the multiple memories and dreams of this period, which have resurfaced from Panh's past. While this serves as a space for Panh to address his own past and memory, *The Missing Picture* also proposes to share this memory with others. The second half of the chapter explores how Panh continues with this work to create a space in the collective memory for the silenced tales of this period; Panh has started this with his previous works as has been studied by Deirdre Boyle (2010) and Annette Hamilton (2013, 2013b). By sharing his story, which subverts the official narratives and images left behind by the Khmer Rouge, Panh demonstrates that the Khmer Rouge's story is also part of a fantasy characteristic of this past of troubled histories. In *The Missing Picture*, fantasy is

the mode in which to bear witness to a repressed but returning past and make space for it in the history of this period.

## 6.2 Film Synopsis

*The Missing Picture* is filmmaker Rithy Pahn's self-reflective documentation of his experience of growing up under and living after the Khmer Rouge's occupation of Cambodia. Pahn's memories of his life before and after the Khmer Rouge ascended to power come to haunt him in his middle age. In the film, he remembers both his family and their home in Phnom Penh before its occupation and their destruction after the Khmer Rouge came to power. The film builds on images of the past that Pahn has extracted from old film footage, photos, and excerpts from his and other films as well as the dioramas and footage he constructs.

Rather than telling two stories of the past that stand in opposition to the present, these images and storylines merge to create a space that is in-between the past and present. In the film, these worlds are brought together through the subjective voice of the narrator and the distinguishing clay figurines that are the protagonists of the film. The lyrical voice-over narration, written by Pahn and delivered in French by the actor Randal Douc, serves as the main oral testimony of the film. This is visually accompanied by the film's figurines that, despite their inherent immobility and structural silence, travel freely between memories as well as the film's constructed and archival settings. Through these representations, *The Missing Picture* presents Pahn's experience both in terms of his memories of the past as well as their continued reiteration in the present.

In recounting his own story, Pahn also brings up the past of his country by examining some of the actions of the Khmer Rouge. This representation of the regime's

past, however, is Panh's retrospective look at history. For example, examining the goals and actions of the regime, Panh measures the regime against the violence and suffering that it perpetrated rather than against the utopian ideals that it advocated. Similarly, Panh interprets the propaganda films made by the Khmer Rouge and shown in *The Missing Picture* with the present knowledge of the violence that the regime would enact. Consequently, he can declare these idealistic renderings of the Khmer Rouge as fantasies. Focusing on the individual and the collective, *The Missing Picture* fills in gaps in Cambodia's collective history by revisiting Panh's own past and his memories of the country's past.

### **6.3 Contexts: Traumatic Transmutation under the Khmer Rouge**

*The Missing Picture* is a confrontation with the different experiences of the Khmer Rouge's reign over Cambodia. It is an attempt to come to terms with their haunting presence in the country and over individuals, which persisted even after they lost control of Cambodia. In their efforts to exert control, the Khmer Rouge created, and attempted to physically enforce, a narrative that conveyed one orthodox experience. Consequently, alternative narratives were silenced not only during their rule, but in its aftermath as well. The result was a protracted process of official recognition of this past that Panh has been developing through his previous films and, on a more personal level, in *The Missing Picture*. The incongruent narratives of the film build on and address the conflicting contexts that surround this past. From the foundation of this period to its haunting return, these narratives shaped not only the Khmer Rouge's rule of Cambodia but also its legacy.

The Khmer Rouge's imposition of a new order led the regime to exert complete control over the physical and psychological spaces of individuals and the nation. The

Khmer Rouge's first acts in power quickly laid the foundations for what would characterise their rule. Evacuating Phnom Penh, they forcefully re-located the population to camps in the countryside (Short, 2004). In these rural camps, people would be transformed and would in turn contribute to the transformation of the whole country. In this move, the Khmer Rouge articulated an "imagined geography" or "geopolitical vision" (Tyner et al, 2015: 1286) in which new visions of the country's natural and physical spaces were conveyed. Their ascendance to power was not only a regime change, but a promise to create a new land.

In expressing the imagined spaces of their idealised country, however, the Khmer Rouge had to take control of the country's narrative and bend to their will. This process can be seen in their first acts after having seized power. For example, the Khmer Rouge justified the evacuation of Phnom Penh through dubious claims of city-wide food shortages and imminent U.S. airstrikes. Pol Pot biographer Philip Short describes how these justifications established a pattern that would become characteristic of the Khmer Rouge's regime. He argues that "the new regime began with a lie", and that "lying would remain one of its defining characteristics... The lie became an instrument of rule, enveloping policy in a miasma of uncertainty, secrecy and dissimulation" (2004: 288). The country was set for a complete and radical change so drastic and revolutionary that it would have to be obtained through violence and deceit.

For this transformation to take place, the regime had to maintain constant control over the population. This resulted in the regime moving Phnom Penh's population to the re-education and labour camps so as to assume physical and social control over people. In the camps, hard labour and starvation made thoughts of rebellion difficult and weakened people's resolve. This enabled the Khmer Rouge to dictate people's dress, food, education,

actions, and even to begin to change the language (Kiernan, 1997).<sup>28</sup> They even restructured the family, taking children away from parents and forcing people to marry with the only intention that the married couple would procreate. As the Khmer Rouge redefined the family structure, the regime sought to form a “new society without memory” (Kiernan, 1997: xii), a society that would only look forward.

By enacting such extreme measures of control, the Khmer Rouge effectively created what Short characterizes as a “slave state” in which there was a “miniscule space for the exercise of free will” (2004: 291). In this slave state, there were no wages, no markets, and no choices in education, work, or relationships. Angkar erected, as refugees would describe the state, a “prison without walls” (291). Through this process of state-building, the Khmer Rouge physically and mentally began to erase the past and impose their vision of the future.

In 1979, the Vietnamese army overthrew the Khmer Rouge regime. The Khmer Rouge retreated to strongholds along the Thai/Cambodian border where they continued to resist successive Vietnamese-backed Cambodian governments. Indeed, the Khmer Rouge managed to maintain a lingering presence not only in Cambodia, but on the world stage well into the 1990s. The rebel Khmer Rouge government was recognised as Cambodia’s representation to the United Nations until 1993 (Menzel, 2007). Consequently, the country’s attempts to escape its recent Khmer Rouge past were blocked by the regime’s persistent presence in the consciousness of the population and continued control over remote areas of the country.

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<sup>28</sup> Kiernan elaborates on this by using the example of the transformation of the word for family under the Khmer Rouge. He describes “In the prerevolutionary Khmer language, the word *kruosaa* meant family. But under the Khmer Rouge it came to mean spouse. As the Khmer Rouge redefined the family, they simply excluded children. Now children belonged not to their parents but to Angkar, the Khmer Rouge’s ruling organization” (1997: xi).

The presence that the Khmer Rouge maintained was furthered by Cambodia's instability following the regime's overthrow. The responses of successive governments as well as the invasion and continuing presence of the Vietnamese army led to conflicting responses. Looking back at this period, questions linger as to whether the Vietnamese army's invasion and subsequent occupation of Cambodia represented liberation and protection or subjugation and coercion (Gottesman, 2003: ix). Those people who had survived the horrors of the previous five years were left looking towards an uncertain future of limited and painful options. The rule of a foreign occupying power did not represent a desirable option. Yet, even after the Vietnamese army withdrew, successive Cambodian governments struggled with their own problems, including corruption and widespread turmoil.

The precarious political situation and continued displacement of people, especially through exile as in the case of Panh, left the country unstable. Without the stability, there was little opportunity to create the testimonial space that would enable the country to reflect upon and reconcile itself with the trauma of the Khmer Rouge's rule. Some dialogue about this traumatic period was initiated by publicized stories such as the case of Dith Pran, whose story was portrayed in *The Killing Fields* (Roland Joffé, 1984), testimonials such as Vann Nath's account of his survival of the notorious S-21 Prison in his memoir *A Cambodian Prison Portrait: One Year in the Khmer Rouge's S-21 Prison* (1998), and films such as the documentary films made by Panh. However, the lack of official action against the lead perpetrators of these crimes left many of the wounds open (Aquino, 2007).

The wait for official recourse would be a long one. Some unofficial trials were held, such as the Vietnamese trial in absentia of Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge Foreign Minister Ieng Sary, and Pol Pot's trials by the Khmer Rouge and Hun Sen in 1997. However, these



unofficial trials did not offer the public space to witness this part of the past. Official legal action was finally taken by the specially convened Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). The ECCC was a tribunal formed of national and international judges and established to investigate and prosecute crimes against humanity perpetrated by leading officials of the Khmer Rouge (Menzle, 2007). The first trial was held against Kaing Guek Eav “Duch”, former head of the S-21 detention centre, and resulted in a 2010 conviction of crimes against humanity, murder, and torture. Subsequent trials of prominent members of Pol Pot’s government led to the convictions of Kheiu Samphan and Nuon Chea for crimes against humanity. While opening up a dialogue about the past and offering a sense of justice, these trials were controversial and costly ordeals (Troeng, 2015). Moreover, the trials were perhaps too little too late. Coming after many of the leaders had died, including Pol Pot, the trials left several parts of the past unaddressed.

This sense of persistent injustice has meant that the need to capture these missing stories from history and bring them into a space for public dialogue remains a pressing issue in Cambodia. A picture of the past is in many cases sorely lacking, or completely missing, and as such remains a spectre that haunts the collective psyche as well as individuals. Further because of the lack of counter narratives, the past remains a domain largely controlled by the Khmer Rouge’s imposed narratives. To this day, the Khmer Rouge’s images and narratives remain the main account of this period. In response, Panh has used his films to witness this past and create a space in the collective psyche for these narratives and a re-examination of Cambodia’s history.

#### **6.4 Revisiting and Restructuring Spaces of the Past**

*The Missing Picture* is framed by the surging waters of the sea. Images of the waves at the

beginning and end of film are not a specific location. The unidentified waters could represent Panh's native Cambodia or his adopted country of France. Rather the images of waves are a conduit to Panh's memory, a story that follows its own throws of suppression and resurrection. As the narrator explains, Panh's memory of his childhood under the Khmer Rouge returns to haunt him in middle age. This return of past ghosts represents both a demand to be witnessed and yet defies the act of witnessing. Consequently, Panh's case becomes a story of navigating the turbulent waters of his past and present memories to find and excavate the silence and repressed parts of his continued story of the experience of the Khmer Rouge.

In confronting and telling his story, Panh addresses the silences that impede his ability to relate his memories. Growing up in the Khmer Rouge labour camps, Panh's experience of that moment was silenced daily by the oppressive environment. His experience was further denied the corroborating testimonies of other labour camp detainees that the Khmer Rouge killed. The silences of the past continue into the present. Not only must Panh find a way of confronting his own past, but he must do so within a group that is also struggling to express this past. The active pursuit of publicly addressing this past is still hindered by numerous obstacles, including the lack of documentation to the continued displacement of many who had lived through this period. As a result, Panh struggles to find a way to bear witness to this history and its lasting legacies.

*The Missing Picture* addresses a past whose witnesses are no longer present to contribute their own experiences and corroborate Panh's telling of his experience. Though Panh's reconnection with this past is partially obstructed, the return of his childhood memories in middle age compels him to bear witness to this period. The film thus seeks the necessary space and alternative means to adequately tell this story. Looking back at his

youth, Panh uses fantasy to represent the transformations and losses that he experienced as a child growing up under the Khmer Rouge. While allowing access to Panh's memories of loss and survival and offering a means to express these memories, the use of fantasy is nevertheless an unsettling reminder that the lost can never be recuperated and the trauma of violence continues.

The film's principal conduit to this past are the figurines that are its key actors. These little clay figurines are each handcrafted and hand painted both onscreen and off. Through this delicate process, they assume their own shape and personality. This process makes them more than dolls, they become representatives of the individuals that they lovingly represent. They represent a past that is mediated through the present. In her study of the film, Leshu Torchin notes Panh's description of going to the river as a child in Cambodia and crafting animal figurines from the clay. When he returns to Cambodia, this evocation of past actions is now carried out with the "earth of a place that holds the bones of the lost and from which many of the survivors were exiled" (2014: 37). She goes on to describe how the

clay figures embody two challenges of representation: the one that occurs when the magnitude of history (and its horrors) defies contained expression and the one that addresses a still-current experience of trauma that requires integration into a personal narrative. Panh rejects documentary naturalism as a style that requires the posture of complete revelation and the production of a spectacle that risks producing a more complacent viewer. Such a viewer would enjoy the certitude of knowledge and emotional satisfaction, rather than experience the distance and difficulties embedded in a project of reclamation that is more process than statement (2014: 37).

These dolls thus come to hold and evoke several layers of the troubled history being presented.

With their multiple, provocative meanings, these figurines occupy a space in-between times and memories. This intermediary space is recalled in the shots that show

the dolls being created: hands gently carve clay into dolls no bigger than the palm of the sculptor's hand. These inanimate objects are created and used in the present. Though the lead actors, these figurines do not speak and do not move. Instead, the figurines populate the constructed and found spaces of the past presented through dioramas, photos, and archival footage. As the figurines move between these spaces, they become a visual representation of the film's narration as well as witnesses in their own right.

Traveling from the present to recreate and populate images of the past, the figurines are also a disturbing reminder that the past is unrecoverable. At once a symbol of loss as they stand in for those no longer present, these figurines also come to counter this loss by populating the missing pictures of the past. It is the figurines, for example, that are used to recreate Phnom Penh's deportation. Despite the resounding impact of this event, which overnight changed the shape of the country and the lives of the country's inhabitants, the documentation and the means of bearing witness to the event are limited. Panh depicts the entrance of the Khmer Rouge into Phnom Penh with a display of figurines placed over faded photos of the city. The images show a city of the past, which was deserted and destroyed by the army's entrance. Panh's cities are left populated only by the memories brought to life through Panh's figurines. The city scenes are followed by a succession of shots of empty spaces, filled with old photos and food left on tables after the Khmer Rouge's evacuation of the city. Railcars full of figurines are carried across a landscape of black and white footage, crossing through images of the countryside. Finally, the figurines settle in dioramas of the labour camps, as the film's narration describes how "Phnom Penh's deportation is a missing picture".

In this story of deportation, and throughout the film, Panh's figurines cross the borders between images and different interpretations of the past. Filmed across the footage

of the countryside through which Phnom Penh's population was transported by the Khmer Rouge, the figurines testify to an undocumented experience that changed Panh and his country. When there are no available images to use as a background, as in the case of the images of starvation in the labour camps, Panh recreates these spaces through dioramas. The figurines again populate the spaces represented by the dioramas, the traces of which have been wiped from history. These spaces created through the dioramas and figurines serve as a visualization of lost experiences. The spaces allow Panh and the audience to bear witness to the people, places, and experiences that were lost. Reminders of lost people and places, the figurines testify to a story still unresolved.

Physically placed within frames of the past, the figurines become haunting reminders of Cambodia's conflicted spaces. The places of the past also have stories to tell, as they are sites of and witnesses to the violent past transformations. The process of inserting the stories of these places, and consequently their influence on Panh's experience, into the film is complicated. The places themselves have been so dramatically transformed or lost that they cannot be directly revisited. For example, Panh's homes and the labour camps are two key places in his memories that shape his childhood experience. Yet, because of subsequent changes or destruction, these places no longer represent that experience. The labour camps, places of forced labour and indoctrination, no longer exist. Similarly, Panh's childhood home has changed so much that the place itself has become, according to Panh, "voided, torn from its history" (*The Missing Picture*). After the Khmer Rouge's rule, his childhood home passed through several incarnations, including a gambling den, a karaoke bar, and a brothel. In continuing to confront his experience of the past, then, Panh also turns to fantasy to invoke the sites, stories, people, emotions, and experiences of these places.

Prominent in Panh's memories of his life before the Khmer Rouge is his childhood home. The home returns as a representation of the idyllic and, subsequently, is what Panh mourns when looking back. The home that Panh remembers, however, is difficult to approach and is instead revisited in its own in-between space. The home in *The Missing Picture* is an anchor for Panh's memories. Yet, it is also a memory of a space that has been lost. Though Panh does not physically return home nor does he show the actual structure, the narrator describes how Panh still remembers every detail of this place from the paintings to the doors to the hallways. As this narration is heard, a hand is seen sketching in painstaking detail the house's every line, crevice, and shadow. The drawing is replaced by a diorama in which the house, full of colours and happy figurines, comes to life and a soundtrack imbues the scene with the echoes of laughter and movement that Panh remembers. There is, then, a resurrection of this space and the experience it holds for Panh that testifies to this part of the past.

Panh's various representations of the house through drawings and dioramas serve to create an idyllic scene. However, at the same time, what is emphasized in the film is the destruction of this ideal and the realization that it can never be reconstructed nor returned to in reality. Into the diorama's garden and hallway, Panh inserts photos of the children that he once watched play in the house. This photo of happy children, with the sound of laughter echoing in the background, stands in contrast to the three flying figures that Panh creates in another part of the film as he describes that these are the children he watched die in the camps. At once rejuvenating this place, as the photos fade into the background, they reinforce that both the people as well as the place are haunting spectres of something that no longer exists and whose picture remains missing. While these memories are still vivid in his mind, they have also faded from history, as they have been buried and denied.

Panh's happy memories of the home are further disturbed as he depicts the effects of the Khmer Rouge invading and destroying this space. Panh also fills in the missing pictures of the Khmer Rouge's entrance and evacuation of his home (and Phnom Penh) through his constructed space in the film. Panh projects footage of Khmer Rouge soldiers carrying guns onto the diorama of the house. This projection physically invades this created space as well as his idyllic memories of his home before its occupation. Here two images collide: the archival footage of the Khmer Rouge and Panh's footage of this (re)created space. As the archival footage invades the (re)created space, Panh witnesses the transformation and loss of his home as he replays this moment.

As Panh constructs the home through his memories and fantasy, he also plays with it through different mediums that at once show how it is still present yet forever lost. The images and mediums juxtapose each other and represent the power and violence of the Khmer Rouge in a situation in which they had control of the image and at the same time Panh's re-insertion of himself in the picture. Panh reclaims power in the narrative by manipulating the image of the Khmer Rouge and recreating the space that for him was taken away. This space, however, has been forever changed by the Khmer Rouge's presence that still overshadows it even in Panh's memories. By bringing these images together and highlighting these power dynamics, he interrogates the missing nature of this place, his own trauma of the loss of home and the place's conversion from the idyllic into the *Unheimlich*.

In chronicling his return to the places and memories of the past, Panh is simultaneously portraying the story of its loss. Panh bears witness to these two states of the past that disturb these memories and that together tell the story of the home's conversion into the *Unheimlich*. While the house is rendered visible through the film's constructions,

it is nevertheless physically unapproachable and has lost the stories of Panh's family and friends who also once populated it and made it the home that he knew. There are no more photos that show the house as it once was nor can Panh interview those who once lived there as they are also absent. Even a physical return is troubled as the house has gone through so many transformations that it is no longer recognizable. The subsequent confrontation highlights the disturbed nature of the home: at once familiar and homely, and yet haunted and perpetually unfamiliar.

Panh produced this film in middle age while living in exile in France. This displacement creates an emotional distance between Panh and his story, which further adds to the disturbed feeling of the portrayal of his home. In making the film and in relating his story, Panh navigates between his adopted home in France and his native homeland of Cambodia. While the story he is telling is that of his life in Cambodia, he is also telling the story of how this past has come to haunt him in middle age in France. In telling his story from a temporal and physical distance, Panh reflects the troubled space of displacement and exile that is also a result of the Khmer Rouge. After his initial eviction from his home, Panh is moved between camps and countries. Despite building new homes and lives, he remains connected to the past life that has shaped him and continues to haunt him. The displacement of Panh and a large proportion of the Cambodian population presents difficulties in finding personal and public spaces to testify to the past. In bearing witness to the violence of the past, Panh also bears witness to how the violence of the past continues to exert a power over the present.

## **6.5 Fantasy as an Act of Resistance**

With these painful memories ever present, Panh's story and film nevertheless offer a



counter narrative to the Khmer Rouge's history of violence with a story of survival. By creating a space in the present to bear witness to its hidden parts, Panh's story of the past becomes an act of defiance against the Khmer Rouge's attempts to break him. Panh recalls this part of his past through the fantastic space that helped him physically and mentally survive this period. Forced to live under the Khmer Rouge's violent pursuit to realize their utopian fantasy, Panh created his own counter fantasy as a form of escape. These memories of Panh's survival carry their own fantastic element, which later influences his decision to express his experience through fantasy.

Again, Panh uses the figurines to fill in this missing picture of the past for both himself and others. In one scene, the figurine of the young Panh is shown sitting on a hammock, defiantly wearing a colourful shirt of bright orange with yellow polka dots. Here, Panh protests physically, at least in his memory, against the imposed uniformity of the Khmer Rouge. Standing out against the other figurines dressed in the required black, Panh's figurine is not only noncompliant in his appearance but in his words. Dressed in his vibrant shirt, the young Panh becomes the camp's storyteller, relating folktales of ghosts and witches, among other "stories from before," to his silenced compatriots. Looking back and filling in the lost voices, the contemporary narrator describes how the young Panh's power to create and share fantasies, gave him the hope and power to gain a privileged position working in the kitchen where he ate well and was thus able to physically survive. Fantasies of protest become intertwined with the fantasies, and ultimately realities, of survival and the ability to relate this tale from the present.

While the act of creating a counter narrative presents a path of hope and survival, it is also a path of opposition and danger. Under the Khmer Rouge, Panh's existence was thus held in a precarious intermediacy between the life giving forces of fantasy and its

potential perils. The danger posed by his fantasies is highlighted when the film relates the young Panh's narration in the camps of the story of Apollo 11. As the storyteller in this setting, Panh not only told tales of witches and ghosts, but also stories of political consequence. In this instance, the young Panh shared his memories of the Apollo 11 mission, its flight to the moon and the American astronaut walking across the moon's surface. However, as a consequence of his story, the young Panh is betrayed and punished. This story goes against the Khmer Rouge's narrative of history. Thus, with this story, Panh's ability to tell tales becomes a threat.

Like his other stories, the story of Apollo 11 is one from the past. It differs, however, as it is one inspired by the history that the Khmer Rouge seeks to eliminate. As the narrator relates this missing picture, the story and images are made up of an intermingling of the memories, fantasies, and historical footage of the moon landing. The young Panh telling the story is transported back to his life before Angkar. The film shows the diorama of his home and his family gathered around a clay television, their motionless bodies watching the moving images of Apollo 11 landing on the little screen. The iconic footage of the Apollo 11 mission soon takes over the full screen, asserting this historically indexical moment and its documentation into the narrative. At once containing a recognizable event, these images also hold the fantasies of the young Panh who dreams of walking across the moon like Neil Armstrong. Panh uses these memories and fantasies to fight against the indoctrination of the Khmer Rouge and survive.

By allowing him to escape, and to dream, the fantasies helped keep the young Panh alive in the space between the reality of the camps and the shelter of his imagination. This use of fantasy recalls Tolkien's defence of the fairy tale in which he argues that in some cases the escapism of fantasy is life affirming rather than life evading (1964). Using the

example of a prisoner, Tolkien questions why a person's desire to escape a threatening or violent space through fantasy should be viewed critically. Similarly, Panh's desire to escape his own imprisonment and the spectre of death that surrounds him seems only rational. Showing a close-up of hands carving a small figurine of a young Panh - in a hunched position, hands over his ears and mouth wide open, aghast with the horror - the narrator describes how in the camps "to hang on you must hide within yourself a strength, a memory, an idea that no one can take from you". The memories and fantasies of the past, and their carry over into the present, are Panh's mode of resilience. They allowed Panh to escape the confines of the camp and survive it and allow his retelling of his past to rebel against a narrative of powerlessness and defeat.

Retelling his story from his position in the present, Panh uses fantasy to tell of this defiance. Panh brings to life the mental flight from the surrounding harsh reality by showing a figurine of his young self soaring across the open sky, free from the confines of the camp. Depicting his own story of survival through this fantastic escape, Panh also shares this desire for survival when he recalls watching his small nieces and nephews die of hunger in the camps. Telling of their death, he juxtaposes their painful story with a photo of the healthy children from before the Khmer Rouge, which is complimented by a sequence of three small figurines flying freely through the sky. By portraying them as flying free, Panh continues to use fantasy as an act of resilience even in the present. Furthermore, Panh provides the means for their story to survive, not only the story of their deaths but more importantly the story of their lives.

This act of resistance continues as Panh not only resurrects and bears witness to the memories of those who died under the Khmer Rouge, but also the culture and traditions eliminated during the regime. Looking to the past, Panh remembers his and his family's

defiance of the Khmer Rouge's indoctrination by keeping alive parts of the past the Khmer Rouge tried to erase from history. The story of Panh's father and mother exemplifies the various acts of subversion that Panh remembers and in which he also participated and bore witness to. Imprisoned in the camps with his family, Panh's father refuses to eat in protest of the inhumane conditions. Even in death, they are denied the ability to bury him according to tradition. Panh's mother instead honours his individual and cultural legacy by enacting a "funeral of words" in which she describes to her son how his father should have been buried. Through what the narrator describes as an "act of resistance", Panh's mother mentally escapes the camp to properly bury his father and grieve in an alternative space. In their own ways, both Panh's mother and father protest the Khmer Rouge by taking control of and inserting their own narratives into a space that seeks to deny this experience.

Panh not only recalls his experience of this resistance, but follows in his parents' footsteps by creating a new cinematic space where his father can be properly buried and mourned in a continued "funeral of words". In *The Missing Picture*, the narrator tells of this funeral while it is represented on the screen. The film shows a line of figurines in white, the father's fellow teachers, students, and family gathered to pay their respects. Here Panh gives his father a funeral in which to mourn and pay his own respects to his father's and mother's rebellion against the Khmer Rouge. Looking back at the past, Panh is able to recreate the funeral as it ought to have been carried out according to tradition. In this way, a part of the past that precedes the Khmer Rouge takeover also comes to supersede this regime. Resurrecting these acts and traditions in *The Missing Picture*, Panh's defiance continues in the present as he goes against the legacy that the Khmer Rouge sought to leave and creates his own counter narrative.

While witnessing how it should have been, Panh's representation also allows him

to acknowledge the troubled aspect of his past. The image that Panh creates is disturbed. At first, the figurines are blurry and present their own ghost like apparition on the screen. As the camera pans over them a second time, the image begins to clear and each figurine is brought to life in a fantasy of resistance. This is not what happened in the past, but what Panh pictures the past could and should have been had his father not died in the camps. This defiance, however, is threatened as the clothes of the figurines suddenly turn black, a reminder of the reality of the camps and the way death was met there. This past is still unsettled, as the resurrection of the funeral, traditions, and memories of the moment are portrayed in a space that is shaped by both violence and resistance to it. This unsettled fantasy recreates a past somewhere in-between Panh's dreams and his life in the camps.

The alternative spaces created to allow his family's subversion under the Khmer Rouge influence how Panh continues to resist the Khmer Rouge's legacy and confront this past. As the past returns to him in middle age as a fragmented story, Panh faces it in the same unsettled state between his present life in France and his memories in Cambodia. Here the figure of the middle age Panh is perpetually distant; a feeling underscored by the multiple voices he uses to tell his own story which, as Leshu Torchin observes, adds to this distance (Torchin, 2014). Though the narration focuses on Panh's personal experience, it is written in Panh's adopted language of French and is recited by a narrator played by French actor Randal Douc, an act which serves to ““intervene to refute common claims of complete and unfettered access to a traumatic experience, and more generally, the past” (Torchin, 2014: 37). In this sense, Panh's voice is present yet heavily mediated. It is also a voice that is affected by the passage of time, as its descriptions and stories of the past are filtered through the present. Images of unidentified hands carving clay in the present show the construction of figurines that come to stand in for people who cannot speak from the

past. The past, then, is readdressed and recreated from the present, creating a situation in which the past haunts the present, and the present haunts the past.

The multiple voices and time periods mix in the film. This is embodied near the end of the film when a blurred image of a man appears onscreen. As the man tries to walk out of the past and into a hazy future, a child approaches him. Though the images of the man and child mirror each other, both walk in different directions, blurred and separate. As the image of the boy becomes visible, the blurred head of the man observes him. Despite the ties and the attraction that these two figures display, they are separated and never able to fully approach each other. These two figures become Panh's adult and childhood selves, which find themselves at an impasse as they are distanced from the story and each other. They meet in an in-between space, recognizable as this world but blurred and different, in which they approach each other but can never fully reconcile.

With *The Missing Picture* Panh has begun to fill in this gap of history with his story. However, his effort to bear witness to the past does not represent the resolution of Panh's relationship with it. The narration at the end affirms that despite the images shown in the film, this missing picture has not yet been found. Instead Panh has made this film to share as part of a continuing process of mourning and reconciliation. The accompanying visual shows Panh's figurine being endlessly reburied, unable to escape a past that repeatedly piles up on him. Panh has confronted elements of the past, but this does not signify a resolution. Both he and his country are stuck between uncovering the past and being reburied by it.

The film's confrontation with the past is unsettling. In bearing witness, Panh presents and faces some of the missing pictures of the past that he does not necessarily want to remember. When the story of his nieces and nephews reappears at the end of the

film, the narrator describes how in his act of bearing witness Panh is also trying to escape these images, “I wish to be rid of this image of hunger and dying so I show it to you”. Though seeing these images does not offer full reconciliation, in sharing them Panh requires himself and others to acknowledge this story. In this, the act of bearing witness takes on its full significance: bearing witness is an act that requires a personal and shared confrontation with the past. These experiences have not only been denied for Panh, but for his country as well. In restoring and sharing their images, Panh subverts the legacy left by the Khmer Rouge and reinserts a personal and collective experience into Cambodia’s history.

## **6.6 Creating a Space in Collective Memory**

*The Missing Picture* is a personal journey of Panh’s confrontation with the past. This journey, however, carries collective implications. Not only does Panh share it and ask others to bear witness to this history, but in telling it Panh must reconcile with the personal and collective silences that have hidden this past. In order to confront these collective barriers to and share his experience of the past, Panh must address the narratives established by the Khmer Rouge and champion alternative, silenced experiences. In *The Missing Picture*, Panh uses fantasy as a subversive tool to challenge both the narratives left by the Khmer Rouge and the silences their rule created.

Acting as a space for Panh to re-insert his narrative, the film also contributes to Panh’s larger project of creating a space for the collective to re-examine its past. Through its subversion of the old and openness to new perspectives, *The Missing Picture*, along with Panh’s other works on the Khmer Rouge, creates an intermediate space in which different voices meet to share and examine a past that has largely been dominated by one narrative.

In this act, cinema becomes a testimonial space where multiple perspectives of this past intermingle between film clips, interviews, re-enactments, memories, and fantasies. Rekindled through this alternative and testimonial space, these experiences subvert dominant narratives and reclaim missing pictures from the country's past.

In sharing his narrative in *The Missing Picture*, Panh contradicts and challenges the interpretations left by the Khmer Rouge of the collective experience. These stories of the past collide, for example, when Panh portrays the labour camps. Beyond forced labour, these camps served in the process of re-education and indoctrination that was to allow the Khmer Rouge to build a new future. The film's narrator describes how in this vein, the Khmer Rouge stripped the Cambodians of their clothes, possessions, and any other markers of their former life when they entered the work camps. Panh fills in this missing picture with his figurines. When the figurines enter the camps, they are transformed into nearly identical statues all dressed in black. They listen to Angkar as it tells of the new society that is being created, "a model society unique in the world without class division". As the narrator repeats this claim, the camera pans from the figurines huddled on the ground to a diorama of the promised world of Angkar's fantasy. The camera hovers over this idyllic existence envisioned by the Khmer Rouge. An existence in which those who are more equal than others live, riding bicycles on paved roads. It is a "perfect world" with a red flag "flying over this utopia".

The scene continues with the camera moving across the reconstructed landscape to finally reach the compound wall. Hovering on this barrier, the narrator describes the final aspect of this perfect society being the freedom of all comrades. At this point, the images reveal what is beyond this idyllic world: figurines of those working in camps digging the dry dirt, hungry and enslaved. Within the same movement, the camera captures two



opposing stories: the Khmer Rouge's utopian vision and Panh's dystopian reality. Presented together, the picture of the past becomes destabilized as it is shown to be comprised of contradictions and diverging interpretations.

In this case, both pictures are missing from history. While the Khmer Rouge spoke of Angkar's dream to make this communist utopia a reality, the dream was never achieved. However, Panh's existence in the camps was realised but was not spoken about or captured on camera. Both narratives are captured through the dioramas that Panh, the one who survived, can now recreate as he presents and questions the past.

*The Missing Picture*'s interrogation of the past continues as the film reinterprets and re-presents the Khmer Rouge's footage with new meanings. Following the scene of Panh's diorama, footage from the Khmer Rouge's own films show people digging dirt with a smile on their face (or with their faces hidden), seemingly happy to contribute to the realisation of Angkar's dream. Later the clips show the Khmer Rouge films of Pol Pot, the main actor in this fantasy whose "myth must be forged". In these scenes set far away from the labour camps, the revolutionary leader walks amongst cheering crowds and lives in the "set" that he builds in the jungle amongst his books and ideology. These images of the Khmer Rouge's portrayal of their own fantasy are markedly different to Panh's fantasy. Even though the Khmer Rouge's films are shot in a realist documentary mode, creating a document that shows the fulfilment of Angkar's promises, Panh's interjections through his narrative and dioramas expose the Khmer Rouge's inability to fulfil their fantasy, as well as the dark reality that the Khmer Rouge struggled to suppress. Brought together in *The Missing Picture*, these two juxtaposing pictures of the past contribute to an opening up of dialogue. Panh's narrative is a challenge to the narrative left by the Khmer Rouge from its position of power, which allows for the sharing of divergent experiences of this period.

Despite the Khmer Rouge's tight control over the narrative produced during their reign, Panh shows that even while they were still in power there were documents of subversion. In *The Missing Picture*, Panh shares a different cinematic narrative created under the Khmer Rouge: the footage of Ang Sarun. Sarun, a Khmer Rouge cameraman, managed to capture the "slow and true" reality of the Democratic Kampuchea. Sarun's footage is composed of straw huts, drought, exhaustion, and the hunger of enslaved people worked to death. Though the cameraman and the footage were suppressed, the footage and the story of Sarun survived and are brought to life again in *The Missing Picture*. A figurine of a cameraman appears over Sarun's footage slowly rotating as he captures this side of the story before fading out of the picture. Ultimately, Sarun's footage led to his own torture and death. Yet, Sarun's footage survives, offering another narrative that undermines the dominance of the Khmer Rouge's claim on the past.

Looking at footage of the present, Panh also explores how the Khmer Rouge failed to realise their fantasies, which rather than revolutionising Cambodia now haunt the country. In their claims justifying the revolutionary upheaval they were conducting, the Khmer Rouge promised not only a present but a future of equality. The apparition in *The Missing Picture* of scenes from Panh's film *La terre des âmes errantes* (*The Land of Wandering Souls*, 2000) of labourers digging in the dirt, however, reaffirms not only the Khmer Rouge's continual haunting, as the poor workers uncover the bones of a Khmer Rouge killing field, but its failure to realize its dream (Torchin, 2014: 39). The narrator points out that these labourers are digging trenches for new fibre optic cables that will connect the now bustling metropolis of Phnom Penh, seen in the background, to the latest technologies are in the same position as they were before the Khmer Rouge. Still digging in the dirt, disenfranchised from the progress of the metropolis, they are the failed

realization of the Khmer Rouge's dream to abolish class divides and inequality. Coming from the present, the glimpse at the life of these workers adds another compromising narrative that shows the experiences that the dreams and pictures of the Khmer Rouge sought to suppress.

While these images of the present tell one story (elaborated in a separate film), it is Panh's story that asserts itself in *The Missing Picture*. In sharing his experience from the position of the present, Panh expresses the personal as well as introduces it into the collective. The figurines and the story they tell not only offer a juxtaposition to the Khmer Rouge's footage of the past, but they also insert themselves into the footage to reclaim their part in a history from which they were erased. As the figurines are transported across blurry black and white footage of the countryside, they add the life and the story of the people who were forcefully displaced and transported to the empty landscape. Similarly, the figurines appear in images of the city and the camps, populating these places with the people that the Khmer Rouge did not include in their vision and consequently do not figure in their narrative. Placing his story in the Khmer Rouge's footage, Panh creates a picture of the past that is in-between narratives, one that lends space to the several voices of the past and, rather than being a fixed narrative, represents the negotiation still being undertaken in regards to this period.

The scenes of Panh's figurines crossing into the Khmer Rouge's filmed footage highlight how Panh negotiates past relationships through the unsettled space of documentary fantasy. The camera returns to the close up of a pair of hands carving figurines from clay, cutting out the faces and carefully painting every detail onto these delicate objects. While these figurines are sculpted from the imagination and labour of Panh and his crew in the present, they also become part of the filmed footage that on the surface

appears to be an indexical documented image of the past. The crossover of these two images and storylines, however, reveal that both forms of representation are in the intermediacy of documentary fantasy: the figurines are at once created images yet are used to express Panh's real experience of this past, while the filmed footage of the Khmer Rouge is both an indexical documented image and yet also their staged creation. As the figurines transgress the borders of fantasy and documentary, they bring new life into the liminal space between these stories. Within this space, the figurines disrupt the regime's total control over this narrative and reclaim part of it. What comes to the fore in the documentary fantasy, then, are the multiple layers and people that were part of this history and need to be acknowledged as part of a continued process of reconciliation.

While countering the Khmer Rouge's narratives of the past, Panh simultaneously works to construct a cinematic testimonial space to represent these diverse experiences. In these sites, Panh brings together the multiple stories, memories, dreams, imaginations, reenactments, speculations, and ghosts of this period. Together they instill the past with new life and meanings. These works, including the more personal narrative of *The Missing Picture*, all contribute to a larger narrative Panh has created through his cinema. This larger narrative that seeks to combat the silence surrounding this period in Cambodian history and restore a counter narrative to the Khmer Rouge (Hamilton 2013, 2013b; Boyle 2010, Torchin 2014). In describing his films about the Khmer Rouge prior to *The Missing Picture*, Annette Hamilton describes how in his films Panh

creates situations where participants comment on their actions, framing history in human terms based on daily repetitive experience, rediscovered through the act of speaking on camera, to an off-screen filmmaker, who stands in for the viewing audience. In this way the audience/viewer is invited to share recollections which become part of collective memory (2013: 13).

This leads to a dialogue about the period that is, as Torchin observes building off of Boyle

and Hamilton, “collective and polyphonic” and constituting “*la parole filmée*, the everyday speech of ordinary people” (2014: 35). These voices diffuse the silence and open up space for more voices.

The return of these stories disrupts the legacy of the Khmer Rouge. In *The Missing Picture*, Panh reminds the audience of the disruptive and redemptive power of film when the narrator claims that “There is no truth. There is only cinema” and that “The revolution is cinema”. The frenetic scene that follows is itself disruptive of the film: a montage of people dancing in a club atmosphere, with loud, pulsing music forming a sound bridge to images of Khmer Rouge footage of girls performing exercises that seem to also be in rhythm with the beat of the music. Jarring in its sense of out-of-placeness, the narrator’s assertion seems both genuine and critical. While there is a truth to each experience, that which lives on is the cinema. These images and narratives become the truth as they form the history of the period. In reclaiming this voice and narrative through film, however, Panh shows that just as “the revolution is cinema” was true for the Khmer Rouge, so is it true in reclaiming the past. Using cinema to disrupt the Khmer Rouge’s claims on the past, Panh creates his own revolution through cinema. A revolution that opens up a collective space to testify and witness the different experiences that compose this history.

Panh’s reclamation of the past not only presents the diverse narratives within a cinematic space, but becomes the cinematic space itself that serves as the visual testament to the past. Panh’s cinematic space counters the cinema left by the Khmer Rouge, unsettling both narratives as they are put in opposition. Within this space, Panh brings together several testimonies, from his own in *The Missing Picture* to those of survivors and perpetrators in his other films, to initiate a dialogue about all those affected. As the past is still unsettled, this convergence takes place through an intermediate space in which conflicting places,

narratives, and survivors can confront the past and present and its position between the everyday and the extraordinary of trauma. In the intermediate space of the films, Deirdre Boyle observes, individual testimonies take on collective implications in which even perpetrators' testimonies serve as not just "exorcism or therapy for them as individuals but for all [of Cambodian] society" (Boyle, 2010: 162). The films act as an alternative space in which these disparate yet connected parties can come together and in which individual testimony becomes part of a collective dialogue and memory.

Even with his most personal film, Panh contributes to the creation of a space for reclaiming the past. This larger project has opened up space for Panh to testify to his experience and for others to testify to their experiences in the cinematic and eventually the tribunal spaces that were open in 2006. *The Missing Picture* thus continues Panh's work of unsettling narratives and opening up spaces for dialogue. Starting in the intermediate space of the cinema that Panh creates, *The Missing Picture* moves beyond his previous works into the country's dialogue and memory.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

Memories can be forgotten and repressed, but can also be remembered and resurface. In the context of a past in which so much was repressed and buried, finding and sharing these memories becomes a journey into and through the unknown. In *The Missing Picture*, the pain connoted in the repeated reburial of the past is tempered by the images of Panh's figurine resiliently resurfacing and the knowledge that this journey, despite the difficulties, is being undertaken. Here, Rithy Panh continues his journey of excavating Cambodia's past to testify and share his story.

In uncovering and sharing his own story, Panh turns to fantasy as a way to reflect and

confront the unsettled position of this past that has been repressed emotionally and physically, personally and collectively. It is a past that has been silenced by the death of witnesses as well as the destruction of pictures and other documentary records. In *The Missing Picture*, Panh creates an alternative space in which he can share his story and attempts to fill in its missing pictures. Rather than a singular, linear narrative, Panh's story is one of multiple layers that combine conflicting memories and diverse modes of representation. Panh recounts and represents his account of his experience, which is composed of his memories of the imaginative and the real as well as the stories of his missing family and their reimagined testimonies. As the inanimate objects and the lost voices are brought to life, they transgress borders and by doing so create a new intermediary space in which this past can be recreated and reflected upon. This act of recreation and reflection subverts the Khmer Rouge's narrative, challenging the dominant story that has been left behind. In the defiant presence of his figurines, Panh's voice reclaims part of this story, filling in the missing picture of this history.

With *The Missing Picture*, Panh further contributes to his project of creating a new space in which silenced and conflicted memories can be created, confronted, and questioned. This creation of a space for dialogue on Cambodia's past contributes to a process of healing that takes on a political dimension. Hamilton and Boyle have pointed to the political aspect in Panh's work by highlighting how his films and work on the Khmer Rouge period has played a significant part in contributing to political and legal action (Hamilton 2013; Boyle, 2010). Panh's films have been so influential that they have become history in their own right, countering the continued denials by subsequent Cambodian leaders of the trauma of this period. For example, Pol Pot's successor Khieu Samphan claimed that it was only after seeing Panh's film *S-21* that he came to understand what had

happened in the notorious S-21 prison (Boyle, 2010). In this sense, though the films have entered an alternative space to tell their story, their connection to the real has been re-asserted. His films have shaped not just the world represented within them but the world around them.

Despite the uncertainty that still characterizes this period, the creation of new spaces to tell these stories and restore this past is propelled by the impetus towards closure. As such, these films offer a new space that counters the trauma of the violent loss of life and space enacted by the Khmer Rouge and the silence that followed their expulsion from power. In creating the space and returning the voices to this past, including his own, Panh presents a path that offers an opportunity to confront, share, and develop a picture of the past that includes its multiple experiences.



## Chapter 7: *Waltz with Bashir*: The Quest for Suppressed Pasts

### 7.1 Introduction

Memories of the past return, but are often, especially in the case of trauma, fragmented and missing parts. *Waltz with Bashir* delves into protagonist and director Ari Folman's search for the missing memories of his service in the Israeli army during the First Lebanon War. Along the way, this quest to rediscover the suppressed parts of his past also becomes one to understand the various ways that traumatic pasts return. In this process of examining and sharing Folman's individual memories as well as those of the soldiers who help him piece together this picture of the past, the film also contributes to expanding the collective discourse of the nation's past. Looking for and giving voice to multiple memories of this still contentious period in individual and national history, *Waltz with Bashir* chronicles the quest for suppressed pasts and the need to, even though painful, look for them.

Standing next to the surging sea on a stormy night, Ari Folman starts to remember his past. During a meeting earlier that night with his friend Boaz Rein-Buskila who shares the nightmares he has of his tour during the First Lebanon War, both men are surprised to find that Folman does not have memories of his own tour. Following the meeting Folman drives to the sea where, as he faces the crashing waves, he turns from the frothing waters of the present to see his first flashback of the war signalled by the flares that fall from the sky lighting up the night. After this shot of the merging past and present, the film cuts to a sequence of Folman's youthful self and two other boys his age floating in the sea off of Beirut's beaches. They slowly pick themselves up and start moving forward towards the ruins of a city that is only lit by the falling flares. As they walk through Beirut's bombed out interiors, deserted and destroyed, they silently observe. The final rush of a stream of

women filing past the lone soldier are also silent and the scene ends with no explanation of what this night means but rather a visual of the past, now open, rushing forward. Once suppressed and silenced, the past comes back to Folman in his middle age as unsettled ghosts that demand to be witnessed.

Rein-Buskila's nightmares, his meeting with Folman, and finally the haunting figures that populate Folman's flashback are rendered visible in this documentary through the use of animation. This form characterizes the film as everything, from the dream sequences to the interviews, are animated until the film's insertion of archival footage in its last minutes. This is not just a stylistic choice. Animation allows Folman to represent the visible as well as invisible parts of his past in a process that is more a quest to find and reconcile one's inner state than searching to share the indexical moments of the past. As such, the surging sea that inspires Folman's return to the past is more metaphorical than literal, reflecting his personal state and setting up what will continue to be a journey based as much on emotions and memories as it is on history. By opening up the representation style to one that emphasizes trauma's return through "fantasies, repression, misperceptions, and interpretations" (Walker, 2005: 7), *Waltz with Bashir* explores new paths towards a complicated and controversial past and its multiple experiences.

By portraying a multi-vocal picture of the past that stands in opposition to any unified narratives that have been created and propagated, *Waltz with Bashir* shows that the history of the First Lebanon War and its legacies is still unresolved. In searching for his own and, consequently, others' memories of the war, Folman creates a space to recollect and present these troubled experiences through the unsettling and intermediate properties of fantasy. Further, the film's inclusion and representation of collective stakes in this past also call into question the societal narrative of violence. In confronting his past as well as that of his

fellow soldiers also sent to fight this war, Folman questions ideas of perpetration, guilt, victimhood, and living with these memories.

In examining this creative process and its implications, this chapter first explores the controversial involvement of Israel in the First Lebanon War. It then looks at the means Folman uses to present the hidden and partial memories that focus on experiential rather than chronological accounts. Finally the chapter illustrates how the intertwining of individual and collective pasts contributes to the positioning of these memories and the trauma they carry as both individual and group issues. Through the unsettled terrain of fantasy, *Waltz with Bashir* explores new ways of representing these silenced memories, stories, and the challenging debates they engender in a present day society that wants to forget.

## **7.2 Film Synopsis**

*Waltz with Bashir* is director/protagonist Ari Folman's journey to find his missing memory of his past. Prompted by a meeting with an old friend and comrade from the First Lebanon War who shares with Folman his haunting memories of the past, Folman begins to question his past and his fragmented and lost memories. Confronted with his inability to remember his tour of duty, specifically his role in the Sabra and Shatila Massacre, the protagonist Folman turns to those around him to help explain and recover this silenced part of his history. Folman interviews his old comrades in arms as well as some of the other soldiers and public figures who were in Lebanon during the war. Each shares his own experience of the war and the memories of this time that still haunt them. These visits to the past through personal and collective memories are interrogated through the interviews Folman also includes of his psychologist friend and an expert on PTSD who help Folman explore

the question of why this suppression occurs. The film thus not only presents haunting memories, but asks why they still return to the sufferers and how such horrific scenes of violence could be suppressed.

These investigations into how others remember and address this past prompt Folman to start to recollect his own experience of the war. Memories return in fragmented instances that are inspired by and interspersed with Folman's interviews. This quest eventually leads to what has been presented as the key moment missing from Folman's memory: his participation in lighting the flares that illuminated the Sabra and Shatila massacre. As this final memory comes back, the animation used during the whole film stops and the last sequences of the film are presented using archival footage of the camps filmed the morning after the massacre. Having found the missing memory, the end of this film still remains in the unsettled as shocking confrontation with this particular part of the past is one of silence that begs the film's unanswered question "What now?"

### **7.3 Contexts: The Unwanted Reminders of the First Lebanon War**

In trying to recall his own memories, Folman also brings up the silenced and unwanted legacy of the First Lebanon War. From its controversial origins to its prolonged realization, Israel's decision to send troops to fight in this conflict has held a debated place in Israeli society. What started in 1982 as a claimed retaliation against the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) for an attempted assassination attempt against an Israeli ambassador, the conflict soon escalated as Israeli forces joined the Lebanese Christian Phalangists in a two-month siege on Beirut. The escalation became part of operation "Peace in Galilee" which aimed to protect the civilian population of Galilee from claimed terrorists' threats. This rapid intensification, however, did not seem to correlate with the assassination attempt

or the stated goal of operation “Peace in Galilee,” thus leading to questions regarding Israel’s motives in this war (Kaufman, 2010: 202).

Riddled by speculation and debate, this conflict soon became a turning point in Israel’s history, particularly as its actions began to be seen less as acts of defence and more as those of aggression. As Gil Hochberg relates, this came to represent a change in Israel’s perception of the war:

If previously the concept of a ‘nation at war’ was successfully rendered within Israeli society in terms of self defence and situated within broader narratives of both victimhood (‘a small nation under attack from the entire Arab world’) and extreme omnipotence (‘a small nation overcoming the aggression of the entire Arab world’), the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon made such national myths impossible to sustain (Hochberg, 2013: 48).

Without a strong moral ground to stand on, the war created divided and hostile reactions in Israel. The conflicted origins, increasing societal disapproval, and the inability to end the war that, as far as the population was concerned, was no longer wanted (the last troops were withdrawn in 2000), led the conflict to become “Israel’s Vietnam”. This stigma came to represent not only the war’s unpopularity at the time, but also its troubled narration and memory in society that, when all was said and done, preferred to forget this past.

In examining how it became a “forgotten war”, Asher Kaufman concludes that, “it is not forgetfulness that has characterized Israeli attitude towards the First Lebanon War, but rather silence, denial, and selective remembrance” (2010: 201). It is this willed silence that disturbs the discourse on the war, especially surrounding questions of the soldiers’ experiences that “have been denied entry into the shared national past” (Yosef, 2010: 313). The inability to speak about the war has left it as an open wound that still demands resolution both for the individuals and the society involved.

As part of the war, the Sabra and Shatila Massacre at the centre of Folman’s trauma remains a particularly contentious memory. Following the assassination of the Lebanese

president elect Bashir Gemayel, members of his Christian Phalangist party entered the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut to take revenge. During the two-day massacre of 16-18 September 1982, the perpetrators killed what has been claimed by various parties to range from a few hundred to a few thousand people. When the killing was over and the cameras arrived what was found was the brief but thorough destruction and devastation.

Though the massacre has been attributed to the Lebanese Kataeb Party Militia, a subsection of Phalangists, the Israel Defence Forces have also been implicated in providing indirect aid. In 1983 the Israel Government Cabinet established the Commission of Inquiry into the Events at the Refugee Camps in Beirut headed by Chief Justice Yitzhak Kahan (Kahan Commission). The commission's findings implicated several high members of the government and army for "indirect" responsibility, including Prime Minister Menachem Begin (Rastegar, 2013: 69). Then Defence Minister Ariel Sharon was accused of holding personal responsibility and, as such, the commission suggested his resignation. Sharon at first refused, and only after a peace march turned deadly did he resign as the Defence Minister. He did, however, remain a Minister in the Cabinet and went on to have a successful political career culminating in his election as Prime Minister in 2001 (Kaufman, 2010: 203). Despite the high profile investigation, Israeli and Lebanese perpetrators were never brought to justice, or even required to publicly admit culpability (Rastegar, 2013: 76). Within the debate of the First Lebanon War, the Sabra and Shatila Massacre remains a particular point of contention within groups who were either forced to or would like to forget.

Although connected to particular acts of aggression, the First Lebanon War is also part of a longer history of violence that continues to this day. One of many wars in the

Israel/Palestine conflict, the First Lebanon War builds off of the past and affects the present and future. The continuation of this larger struggle is evidenced when considering the contexts in which *Waltz with Bashir* was released. Folman's encounter with Rein-Buskila and the beginning of his journey occurs in 2006, soon after the end of the Second *Intifada* (2000-2005) and directly following the Second Lebanon War of that year. In both these conflicts there was an increased amount of violence within the region, including large numbers of civilian casualties. Thus while both were part of a larger history of violence and struggle over territory within the region, the heightened targeting of civilians created a shift in thinking about the effects of violence. Israeli film scholar Raya Morag describes this as being part of "new war" in which traditional dichotomies, such as "terror-war, front-home, civilian-soldier..." were shattered and led to new perceptions of physical vulnerability that manifested in Israeli cinema (2013: 5).

The cinema that came out at the time was marked by a return to other past moments of collective violence and its repercussions in Israeli history. In his book on trauma in contemporary Israeli cinema, Raz Yosef notes a dramatic return to past events that were "repressed or insufficiently mourned, such as the memory of the Holocaust, war traumas, the losses entailed by the experience of immigration, and the trauma of the Israeli occupation and victimization of the Palestinian people...." Israeli cinema in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was thus marked by a period of "melancholic cinema that bears witness to the crises of historical national memory in Israel" (2011: 5). Within this return to repressed pasts several films re-examining the First Lebanon War were released. The internationally acclaimed and award-winning films *Beaufort* (Joseph Cedar, 2007) and *Lebanon* (Samuel Maoz, 2009) along with *Waltz with Bashir*, were all directed by former soldiers in the First Lebanon War and, while not the first films to address this subject, presented a distinct turn

in focus. Rather than questioning the war itself, they instead interrogated the memory of the war (Rastegar, 2013: 66). Read within the context of the new waves of violence in which they were released, they pointed to a continued trauma for both individuals and a collective that had not fully reconciled with this past. The story of the First Lebanon War and *Waltz with Bashir* is not just about one war or one memory, but the violence and trauma that are in-between multiple wars and is always present.

This return to unresolved pasts is part of, as Morag and Yosef investigate, a re-examination of collective identity.<sup>29</sup> In a state where the violence of the past returns both as a haunting memory and a physical manifestation of more violence, the First Lebanon War represents one such historical point that continues to be part of the cultural politics of shaping a collective identity. The re-appearance of these contested pasts does not bring guaranteed resolution but instead gives space to express and question the multiple perspectives that surround these events and the diverse effects it has on the present.

#### **7.4 Between Dreams and the Past: Witnessing the Life of Memory**

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<sup>29</sup> Israeli filmmaker Avi Mograbi highlights the complexities of this collective identity in a society not only haunted by conflict, but made up of those who have participated in these conflicts (from the leaders to the soldiers). In his documentary *How I Learned to Overcome My Fear and Love Arik Sharon* (1997), pacifist Mograbi sets out to explore the man who, even though formerly named for his roles in the Sabra and Shatila Massacre and other acts of violence committed during the First Lebanon War, still managed to rise to power and become the Prime Minister. As he too becomes enchanted with this man, Mograbi's film questions the complexities of living in a society whose violence and stance towards this violence comes to affect the everyday life of its citizens not just during times of war but in its aftermath.

Mograbi's documentary *Z32* (2008) further highlights these questions in regards to the citizens who have served in the army as the director narrates his struggle of recording and presenting the interview of an ex-soldier confessing his crimes and how, even though he disapproves of the soldier's actions, he nevertheless cannot condemn this character and has an ambiguous relationship with him. Using formal elements as masking techniques in a way cover the soldier's identity as a perpetrator in order to allow him to tell his trauma, this film not only highlights the soldier's blurred subjectivity but also his troubled place in a society that has sent him to war but does not want to reflect on the trauma this has generated.



When Boaz Rein-Buskila asks Folman in the opening scene whether he remembers the First Lebanon War, Folman denies any recollections. Rein-Buskila repeats his question, to which Folman admits that, “the truth is that it’s not stored in my system”. Folman’s case is more than an instance of forgetfulness, but rather a lost past that he has willingly left buried for over 20 years. As his figure is shown driving away in the rain towards the churning sea, Folman narrates how after this encounter he finally has a flashback of the war.

In this opening scene, Folman is seemingly caught off guard by the subject of his time serving in the First Lebanon War. Long forgotten, this had not been something Folman sought to remember or reconcile. This past, for which expression has been denied and avoided, is one imbued with fears and uncertainties that prompts Folman’s hesitancy to begin the journey into his past.

Folman’s uncertainty about his own past, and whether or not he wants to return to this place, is reflected not only in his expressed reservations towards starting this quest but in the film’s approach as well. While the documentary’s animation and focus on dreams creates a means to present that which is not easily accessible for Folman or the other soldiers, at the same time it highlights general reservations regarding this period. Confronted with this challenge, the film explores these experiences through fantasy. The mingling and malleability of memories in a liminal space allow for Folman to bear witness to a past that is multi-vocal and multifaceted. Further within this space, Folman is able to confront his own conflicted and complicated past and the contradictions of perpetration and victimization that belie this experience.

The sense of wariness and instability that underscore this journey is cultivated from the beginning of *Waltz with Bashir*. This autobiographical documentary starts with twenty-six ravenous dogs that run down Tel Aviv’s Rothschild Boulevard. Though they start out

as a menacing threat, the dogs are revealed not to be a depiction of the real but rather the haunting nightmares from the war. The intensity with which they tear through the streets in their pursuit of something still unknown is a jarring opening, creating an “unmooring audio-visual spectacle that assaults the audience’s senses” (Bendor and Landesman 2011: 354). This disturbing scene that ends with the dogs ferociously barking at a man on a balcony marks a feeling of unease towards looking to the past. These memories return in the form of nightmares that are threatening and possibly best left avoided.

This autobiographical documentary’s starting point in the dream state rather than the indexical further highlights the unstable grounds on which this journey is based. The cut to the next scene of two middle aged men sitting in a bar and discussing the past is not a complete break from this dream like state as the animation connects these two scenes. Further it is revealed that this is not even the dream of the protagonist but rather that of his friend. Thus what will be developed as a documentary and personal journey is actually built off of animation as well as the dreams and memories of another.

Confronted with not only societal silences but his own suppressions that bury this memory, Folman’s quest must rely on alternative narrations and representations that combined can begin to piece together an experience. Brought together in the created space of the film, the multiple voices highlight the past’s intermediate state. They at once lend themselves to helping find and support Folman’s experience and at the same undermine it by presenting their own, sometimes contradictory, versions of the past. Helping Folman find his past, they show that it is still unsettled and, even when found, uncertain.

Folman’s meeting with Rein-Buskila at the beginning of the narrative triggers his memory and starts his journey to the past that he then must find others to corroborate. There is no existing image of Folman’s recollection of three young soldiers floating in the calm

sea, illuminated by the amber lights of the flares fired over the war-torn city. The individual memory thus becomes tied to the collective as recollections of the past depend on others. Folman first visits his fellow soldier, Carmi Cna'an, who also appears in his initial memory of the war. As the other potential witness, Cna'an offers the hope of filling in the missing parts of Folman's haunting memory and settling the past. Cna'an, however, denies his position in Folman's recollections. He is hesitant to remember this period in his life and repeatedly questions Folman as to his purpose in looking to rekindle these memories.

Folman's visit to Cna'an is filled with suspicion regarding the past as this is something that is not discussed and has the potential of bringing up the ghosts of past actions committed under the duress of war. Cna'an evades these particular paths by relating the surreal experience of his dreams during the war which served as a way to escape moments of intense fear. By not corroborating Folman's story, however, the past is shown as a disputed territory that can contradict or avoid the unpleasant parts.

While Cna'an does not remember being part of Folman's memory, Folman's comrade Shmuel Frenkel presents Folman with memories that he himself does not recall. Frenkel claims that he and Folman were together since basic training, yet their memories do not match. Frenkel, too, has a personal experience that is mediated and manipulated through time and tellings. Looking back on his past, Frenkel shares his story of fighting in an orchard with Folman and confronting a child with a Rocket-Propelled Grenade (RPG). Seeing this child firing at them, the soldiers return fire and the child is killed.

This scene is disturbing not just in that it leads to the death of a child, but in the uncomfortable questions it brings up in regards to acts of violence committed in the line of duty. The scene's contradictory circumstances are conveyed through its surreal portrayal. The animated sequence that illustrates Frenkel's narration of the event is accompanied by

a serene melody that offsets the horror of the events unfolding. The soft music plays as images of soldiers crawling through an orchard in a golden haze take to the screen. From the depictions of soldiers in combat attire and position, the camera zooms in on the animated figurine of the child holding the RPG. Frenkel recounts how the soldiers fired and as the camera pulls away, the crumpled body of the child is left lying dead in this magical place as the music fades. The horror of this incident is offset as the consequences of this action are distanced by the scene's dreamlike portrayal. Further this past is also left uncorroborated as it is Frenkel who acts as the sole witness to an incident that Folman does not recall. Again stories diverge and while they make up a picture of the multifaceted past, they also show the distances, suppressions, and unconfirmed retellings that plague this past with uncertainty.

As Folman finds that memory is unpredictable and possibly even dangerous, leading to his and others' hesitation in recalling all parts of the past, he seeks to understand the intricacies of memory itself. In this pursuit, Folman turns to expert witnesses to answer questions of why memories disappear and how they can be recovered. These testimonies confirm the malleability of memory and, consequently, the uncertain path the film is following. Wanting to understand why Rein-Buskila's dream has suddenly conjured up his own memories of Lebanon and what he should do with this new memory, Folman visits his psychologist Ori Sivan. In his role as the expert witness that offers an authoritative reading for Folman and the viewer to follow, Sivan explains how memory is not static but continually reshaped and assures Folman that his memories will only take him where he needs to go. In this, Sivan prompts the quest into the unfamiliar by hinting that memory will always offer a protective shield that will make the past bearable.

While Sivan's explanation begins with an animated sequence of Sivan and Folman

sitting at a table in a casual interview style, this image is replaced by an illustration of a memory experiment he is describing. Accompanied by a whimsical piano melody, Sivan's explanation of how people can come to believe they have a memory of something that never took place is accompanied by the images of this experiment brought to life through animation. In explaining how memories are not always tied to the indexical, Sivan highlights how they are grounded in uncertainty. This is further underscored as the animation that brings these false memories from the experiment alive is the same tool that brings to life the other memories in the film. Though not denying memories, this explanation and representation unsettle them and position the memories upon which the film is based to be forever uncertain.

As he discovers more about his past, Folman visits post trauma specialist Professor Zahava Solomon. Surrounded by her books and her title, Professor Solomon is positioned as an unbiased expert and her testimony is framed with authority. Solomon's explanation provides further detail on the idea of the protective lenses to which Sivan alludes. Using the example of a soldier, Solomon details how he was able to get through the war by filtering his experience in this role. The safety created by his protective distancing is shattered, however, when the metaphorical camera he has been using to view these scenes of war from afar breaks and he is confronted with the horrors surrounding him. As Solomon explains this example, it is again accompanied with the animated representation of this soldier's experience. Surreal landscapes and the terrifying field of horses writhing in their last throws of life, the image that breaks the young soldier's protective "camera", depict Folman and the animator's interpretation of a scene they themselves have not witnessed and only heard described from a secondary witness. The expert testimony on how violence and the memory of it is filtered thus demonstrates even

more filters when it comes to representation. This story is distanced from its indexical moment and even the first person witness, showing how it is changed as it is passed between people over time. What this expert testimony serves to confirm, then, is that memory and its representation are unstable and that Folman's and the film's journey into the past is built off of shifting foundations.

In these relations and discourses on memory, the past is highlighted as an intermediate territory that, though based on indexical moments, is influenced by the emotions, dreams, and experiences of others in its return. These aspects at once fill in the pictures of the past but also question it by underscoring the changing nature of the memories on which these pictures are built. Animation contributes to both the representation and questioning of representation that occur here. More specifically, animation in the case of *Waltz with Bashir* leads to discussions of the relationship between truth and memory when it is troubled by trauma (Honess Roe, 2013). In her larger study *Animated Documentary*, Annabelle Honess Roe examines how this film uses animation to fill the gaps and silences in memory in ways that express the fluidity of memory and reflect Janet Walker's idea of "disremembering" which Walker defines as "remembering with a difference" (2005: 17). Though highlighting that these memories are potentially forgotten, undocumented, or "disremembered", this mode of representation leads to reflection on the truth to be found in that which is forgotten or inaccurately remembered either unconsciously or purposefully. In cases of trauma, this too is just as much a part of the past and can reveal "great significance regarding the meaning of past events" (Honess Roe, 2013: 155). In its remembering and "disremembering", the film's animation facilitates the complicated confrontation and reconciliation particular to the dynamic memories of traumatic pasts.

The inspiration for these reflections that is advanced through animation is experience and emotion as opposed to the “objective” (Honesty Roe, 2013: 161). Animation leads to the subjective of the autobiographical documentary as it provides a way to more fully embrace the subject’s point of view by illustrating his thoughts and memories. This access to the experiential is further conveyed through *Waltz with Bashir*’s surreal renderings of memories as well as the multiple dream and dreamlike sequences. There are no existing images of these moments, much less a snapshot of their emotional reality, and the constructed animation sequences bring these moments to life on screen. Further they emphasize the changes history undergoes as it is seen through the subjective in which it takes on elements of the impossible and unimaginable to convey the personal. Roy Bendor and Ohad Landesman show how this subjectivity is furthered by arguing how the animation in *Waltz with Bashir* creates an impulse for identification through the somatic connection it establishes with the viewer. As the authors describe it, “the spectator’s somatic response to the film mirrors Folman’s own experiences: as Folman lets his senses guide him from amnesia to awakening so do we, the viewers, thus making Folman’s mnemonic journey very much our own” (Bendor and Landseman, 2011: 366). Subjectivity is thus emphasized and shared with the viewer.

The return of Folman’s and some of the other soldiers’ memories is marked by a dreamlike state in which capturing the objective is not always the focal point. Folman’s memories after his visit to his friend Carmi Cna’an return in a surreal form. He goes back to the first night he arrived in Lebanon and remembers how he was charged with transporting the bodies of the wounded and dead in a tank. Beyond capturing what occurred that night, the rendering of Folman’s memory also conveys the emotional experiences of the young soldier on his first night in war. Never having seen a body broken by war, Folman

is confronted with the defeated bodies of other young soldiers and is tasked to drive them through hostile and unfamiliar terrain to their final destination. The scene takes on elements of the fantastic as the mist envelops the tank and the silver foil engulfing the bodies lying on the tarmac shines as if from another planet. While the animation brings back the memory, it also emphasizes its distance as it shrouds the sequence with a sense of otherworldliness. These memories represent a disturbed time for Folman and their recall through an animated, almost dream-like, sequence underscores the still unsettled emotional state in which they return.

Even Folman's return home presents an experience of emotional estrangement. Folman describes how he was shocked when he returned from his first tour of duty as the space of the city he had grown up in had become unfamiliar. In this scene the young soldier Folman wanders through his city as if it were a world of fantasy, yet in this case it is not the city that is the uncanny, but Folman who has changed and is strange. Here he becomes the out-of-place observer, no longer able to connect to the blaring punk song and animations of youth carrying on with life that pass before him like a dream. Separated from his life in society that continued to function as normal, even during the war Folman had to reconcile questions of his position as a soldier that forced him along a path of transformation while the world he knew stayed the same.

When he is called back to Lebanon as the army prepares to enter Beirut, Folman is equally physically and mentally out-of-place. The manner in which Folman's memories return reflects this displaced feeling. He continues to be an observer, watching his own fantasies and the world around him as if it was a movie. Folman remembers flying into Beirut and fantasizing about his own death. As he is shown sitting in the helicopter with the other soldiers, he looks straight ahead at the scene he imagines. His ex-girlfriend wails



over his corpse as it is marched away. Folman's memory of entering the city thus becomes the memory of a dream. This dream flows seamlessly into the images and narration of Folman's past, marking the past as somewhere in-between the events and the dreams that shaped it.

The blurring between events and their interpreted states within the realm of memory continues when Folman lands in the Beirut International Airport. This blurring is not just caused because Folman's memory has faded over time, but rather highlights the distance he felt from this event even in the moment. His experience then and its representation now focus less on chronicling events than on capturing emotional states. Folman recounts walking through the airport in a hallucinatory state, seeing the shops and flight boards and imagining that he was at the airport to depart on a trip. The animation shows the soldier's dream, which is broken when he realizes that the airport stores are ransacked messes and the planes are bombed out carcasses. The presented images of the airport suddenly change and there is a new animated rendering of this memory of the destruction he saw. These two images are seamlessly integrated into one experience and its memory that reside in the in-between space of fantasy.

As Folman draws closer to finding the suppressed part of his past, he is at the same time increasingly distanced as his voice diminishes in the story's narration. It is not Folman who tells the story of how he traversed the city to reach the Sabra and Shatila camps, nor he who relates what happened there. Rather as his animated figurine is seen at different points of the journey leading up to his arrival at the camp, others come in to help narrate. At this point Folman not only relies on his fellow soldiers to fill in the missing pictures of his past, but other key figures who were there as well. The reporter Ron Ben-Yishai and Commander Dror Harazi divert the narration from Folman's own experience as they fill in

pieces of the story of the massacre itself. Folman's approach to his confrontation with his own experience and lost memory is thus facilitated and overshadowed by the voice of others. On the one hand, this lends authority to the depiction of events by inserting these expert witnesses. On the other, it highlights Folman's continued removal from the story and his challenges with reconciliation.

When the memory of the Sabra and Shatila massacre finally returns to Folman, it is met by his silence. The young soldier stands speechless in front of the camp as the women and children survivors come rushing towards him, screaming of the horror. A close up of Folman's animated face reveals nothing as the soldier, like the audience, is confronted with images that all he can do is witness. The disturbance of the character is conveyed not by what is shown onscreen, but the change of lenses that occurs at this moment. It is here that, as Professor Solomon describes earlier, Folman's "camera breaks" and he is no longer able to filter the past and its horror. The final images of the film are archival footage of the camp following the massacre. As the screams of the women fade, all voices are lost and the last part of the film is left in complete silence. At once stressing the horror of these images, this inability and denial of expression also leaves the film unresolved. Folman has found his memory but now the question, as it was at the beginning of the film, is how he lives with it.

While Folman is finally able to witness the past and, to a degree, the role he has played in it, the memory remains unsettled.<sup>30</sup> Leading up to this final confrontation, *Waltz with Bashir* focuses on capturing Folman's emotional state in the past. Here even this is

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<sup>30</sup> By leaving this memory unsettled, it can be argued that Folman chooses not to confront his culpability. Chaudhuri and Rastegar have criticized the film for not fully accepting culpability. Even Morag and Yosef, looking at the case through the lens of perpetrator trauma, question Folman's confrontation with his actions and complicity in acts of perpetration.

lost as, confronted with the past, Folman still does not know how to react to it. The difficulty in confronting and understanding the traumatic past is that this memory remains one subject to its own contradictions as Folman sees his past self as a victim of circumstance that put him in the position of perpetration. Unresolved for Folman, this past also remains unresolved for society and the audience, leading to an uncertainty regarding not only Folman's role in these events, but questions as to how this is part of a larger collective narrative that needs to still be confronted.

### **7.5 Societal Silences and Legacies of Collective Violence**

In the last scene of *Waltz with Bashir*, Folman becomes a witness to the past. Though he was part of it, being called upon as a soldier to light the flares that illuminated the Sabra and Shatila camps and aided the massacres, in this scene he is removed and placed as an observer. Rendered silent, he is unable to speak for or process the experience of the massacre. As Folman looks on, so does the audience who share his point of view as they too are confronted with the archival footage of the past. The ending of the film reinforces that although this has been a personal journey for Folman, it is nonetheless part of a larger narrative of societal silences and collective confrontations in regards to a history that is part of the larger legacies of the region.

Reflecting on the role of the collective in whose names these acts are carried out is seen by Morag as a crucial element of addressing perpetrator trauma. The films that broach this topic thus, according to Morag, "demand a complex negotiation of the discrepancies between the post-traumatic memories of individual soldiers, those of their army units, and, by implication, of the society that sent them" (2013: 3). This need nevertheless proves difficult to accomplish as the traumatized perpetrator's story appears as an "unwanted

ghost” both to himself and a society that is not ready to create a space for this character, much less embrace it, as acknowledging the perpetrator’s deeds and trauma forces them to acknowledge that these are deeds “carried out in their name” (2013: 6). By ignoring its role, society prevents itself from embarking on a path towards collective reconciliation. What Morag argues is needed is a situation in which the “acknowledgment of perpetrators’ trauma will set in motion society’s acknowledgment of the perpetrator as its envoy, and its relation to (usually ethnic) others. This acknowledgment is a first step towards a fuller consideration of life with others and thus of mourning those who were previously conceived as ungrievable” (2013: 6). Morag’s response calls for a new epistemology to open up reflections, dialogue, and possible reconciliations, a goal which can only be reached through the collective recognition of their role in both being a perpetrator and a victim of this on-going trauma.<sup>31</sup> This new epistemology thus demands the blurring of boundaries between individual and collective memories and roles; a blending that takes place in the fantasies of *Waltz with Bashir*.

Folman’s individual confrontation is one that is influenced by and influences collective memories of war. As he undergoes his journey through this intermediary state, the memories of others as well a collective history of violence (including the First Lebanon War and the Holocaust) and silence and irresolution all become a part of his story. Thus the film confronts not only Folman’s story, but history, and in this process serves both as

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<sup>31</sup> In her discourse on the collective’s implications, Morag reflects on her position as part of this collective and what steps she and her own society need to take in the process of reconciliation. In her preface, Morag outlines her position as, “an Israeli leftist scholar, caught in the trap of being symbolically and practically part of a regime of an occupation I detest, it is my aim to define the horizon of the new epistemology in order to pave the way for acknowledgment of perpetration deeds done in my name in the Occupied Territories” (xvi). Beyond the films she analyzes, Morag’s book shows the steps being taken in society by individuals like herself to open up discussions of these collective goals.

a space for Folman's individual reflection as well as a collective reflection. *Waltz with Bashir* uses fantasy to create a liminal space in which multiple memories merge to present a multi-vocal past that defies one overarching narrative. The film elaborates beyond the individual haunting of the past for one soldier as it becomes a story of the multiple hauntings that make up and mediate this past. Giving voice to other soldiers as well as a societal past haunted by violence, the film points to the need for the multifaceted dialogue still to be developed in the case of this unresolved history.

The film starts between memories, implicating its position in creating a collective dialogue. The opening scene depicts Rein-Buskila's nightmare of the dogs he killed during the war. Though the film starts with the most personal of memories (a dream), it also starts with the dialogue. Rein-Buskila relates this story to Folman who, in turn, shares it with an audience. As these memories are shared with Folman, they in turn spark Folman's own memories and the film departs from the starting point of Rein-Buskila's experience to a path that will lead to multiple experiences of the war.

These layers of communication in which the personal is expressed in interpersonal contexts begins the process of collective memory. Individual memory is shaped by and becomes part of a group as it is shared with others through the collective codes of language and the process of group interaction (Halbwachs, 1992). The film's beginning with a friend's, rather than the protagonist's, haunted dreams demonstrate this exchange and the reliance on the collective in telling this story. It is only after Rein- Buskila shares his experience that Folman, who will lead the film on its journey into the past, recalls his own experiences that have been out of his system for more than twenty years. Folman cannot undergo this journey alone, nor is confronting the past only Folman's journey as the memories and exchanges shared in the film inspire reflection on the collective experience

of the First Lebanon War.

This interconnection of experiences is advanced as several testimonies are incorporated in the film into what becomes a collective narrative. Honess Roe notes how animation supports this interconnection as it brings together memories and “becomes a means to draw them into a broader social, political and cultural history” (2013: 144). While Folman relies on other narratives to help him recall his own, the story is not just centred on his experience. The interviews, memories, and fantasies of the past shown in the film are not always related and can sometimes even contradict Folman’s own experience. Carmi Cna’an, for example, denies being with Folman at the time of the massacre even though he appears in Folman’s memory. Despite such discrepancies, these memories are nevertheless included in what becomes an account of a collective experience of soldiers in the First Lebanon War. Together the contradictions and painful nature of these memories portray a disturbed group experience as they reinforce the feeling of irresolution regarding a past that has been personally and collectively silenced.

Haunting memories come back to exist in a painful transitory point between the illusions of the past and their reflection in the present for Folman and his fellow soldiers. Ronny Dayag’s account of the war illustrates this merging of past and present in unresolved experiences. As the ex-soldier strolls along the sea in his middle age, he is overcome by the feeling of guilt over the death of his comrades that his memories bring back. Walking head down into the darkness of the night he fades, like the unwanted ghost, into the background as on the other side a young soldier enters the frame illuminated by the rising sun. This young soldier’s entrance, shirtless and irreverent, initiates a depiction of the fantasy of war that includes boys relaxing on a beach, surfing around dropping bombs, and indiscriminately shooting at enemies that never appear; all accompanied by a rousing rock

and roll soundtrack. The dream of a soldier's life, recreated in this video-game-like scenario that shows the soldiers' "fantasy of omnipotent control over the territory" as well as the "sheer ignorance of the war" (Chaudhuri, 2014: 151), stands in stark contrast to the remorseful memories of the older soldier who, beyond this fantasy, experienced the violence and trauma of war. This juxtaposition created by the merging of worlds highlights the irresolution that characterizes these other stories that make up this narrative of the past.

The depiction of the soldiers' war memories through fantasy frames them in terms of their unresolved status as dreams and illusions are used to convey that which is still disturbing. These memories are characterized by their experiences of fear and violence that make the individuals in the film wary of approaching them. Fantasy provides an alternative path that allows for acknowledgement while still keeping a distance through estrangement.

Folman as well as the other soldiers often turn to dreams or dream-like states to explain the past. Cna'an, reluctant to talk about the war, instead relates to Folman the dream he had on the night he entered Lebanon. Fearful and physically powerless because of his seasickness, Cna'an fell asleep on the boat that took them to war and dreamed of his escape. The young soldier is taken off the boat by a giant naked woman who calmly paddles him safely away as a bomb hits the boat and his friends die. Taking him away from violence, the dream represents a safety valve to protect Cna'an from an experience rooted in fear and horror. Relating the dream, Cna'an expresses his fear while also estranging it and keeping it at a safe distance.

Cna'an's recounting of the destruction and death that he witnessed in Beirut also takes on the aspect of a dream like fantasy that conveys and protects him from this violence. He describes the atrocities he saw as a kind of horrible LSD trip, the horrors (which he points out are undertaken by the "sadistic" Phalangists) so unreal it is as if they were a

hallucination. The space he enters in Lebanon is sinister and strange, and while it carries traces of this world, it also appears as if it is part of another. The relation of this experience through fantasy highlights Cna'an's alienating experience and the danger it holds both in the past and present.

Frenkel's memories also make the past seem otherworldly and highlight its unsettling position in individual and collective history. The melodic accompaniment present in Frenkel's memory of entering Beirut clashes with the war story being told, making what is a narrative of fighting seem unfamiliar. As the soldiers around him barricade themselves in trenches and return fire to the unseen gunmen in the high rises above, Frenkel takes a gun and rains bullets in a trance like dance in front of the posters of the assassinated President-elect Bashir Gemayel that Folman poetically dubs as Frenkel's "waltz with Bashir". This scene, as well as the one of him in the orchard which is accompanied by a similar harmonic instrumental, are the film's war waltzes. These dances through memory, guided by the classical music and its matching choreography, partially remove these episodes from the horrors and fear of this reality by placing them in another dimension. Taking one step forward and one step back, the soldiers move on with their lives but always return to this past which is also a part of their dance, within, around and as an integral part of their memory.

Building off of their own dreams as well as those of others, the stories merge in this space that allows for the incorporation of multiple experiences into a larger collective one. This blending becomes even more apparent as the film approaches the buried memory of the massacre at which point the multiple storytellers are all contributing to the narrative of this specific memory. Folman's start of the narration with his memory of his entrance into Beirut already begins to show the dimensions of the collective. When Folman snaps out of



the hallucinatory state in which he roamed the Beirut International Airport upon his arrival in the city, the images he shows are partly his and partly those of the collective. The picture of the destruction that faces him resembles iconic photos of the destroyed airport from the war that were accessible to the public (Bendor and Landesman, 2011). Basing his representation of a personal memory on what is part of the public domain, this particular rendering already begins to show how this memory has become influenced by and part of a collective.

As Folman continues to narrate those first encounters, from his airport landing to the walk down Beirut's Corniche promenade and the attack by snipers, his story is subsumed by Frenkel who tells of his own experience of the sniper attack. Frenkel and Folman's stories merge as Frenkel describes how he obtained a gun and started shooting in his trance-like state. This lyrical turn of Frenkel's waltz delves further into fantasy upon the entrance of the journalist Ron Ben-Yishai. This imposing figure towers over the crouched soldiers and cameraman, walking tall amidst the gunfire like "superman". Entering the scene like an action star, Ben-Yishai also contributes to its narration by describing the people watching the gunfight from their balconies, "as if it were a film". Here Folman's personal experience as remembered through his dreams and fantasies is subsumed as it is influenced and overtaken by other narrations as well as collective imaginary.

This melding of memories brings together multiple voices to relate the experience of this particular moment. In this merging the story does not just focus on individual soldier experiences but begins to question the implications of the military and society in this act. While the narration starts with Folman and Frenkel's perspectives, it then expands in its telling to include narrations by Ben-Yishai and Commander Dror Harazi. Both in Lebanon

during the massacre, these men expand the narration to include background on how the massacre occurred and the Israeli military's role in it. With these interjections, the position of the collective is expanded as the developed story leads to questions regarding the distinction between individual action and culpability in an act that carried collective connections.

Ben-Yishai and Harazi's testimonies include an explanation of the commanding officers' complicity in the massacre. Both on the ground, Ben-Yishai and Harazi saw that something strange and sinister was occurring and tried to find out more. Harazi spoke to his commanding officer and was assured that he should continue despite the alarming reports he was hearing from his soldiers. Ben-Yishai called then Defence Minister Ariel Sharon and informed him of the rumours he had been hearing. Sharon also told him not preoccupy himself. These relations of the larger forces at work that allowed for the continuation of the massacre, later confirmed by the Kahan Commission (1983), again moves the story away from just a personal account to one of the layers of involvement and complicity that led to these events.

It is this final combination of stories, culminating in the merging of Ben-Yishai's and Folman's memories, which lead to not just Folman's, but a collective confrontation with the massacre. Narrating his entrance into the camps on the dawn after the massacre, Ben-Yishai describes in detail his final realization of the horrors that had happened there. As he walks through the camps his gaze turns to the animated surviving women, filing past in a ghostly procession of grief. They continue wailing and walking away as the camera picks up speed, moving past them until it finally finds the young Folman, staring in disbelief and distress at what is approaching him. In this act, Ben-Yishai's memory becomes Folman's, inspiring him to confront his (and the nation's) past. It is here, as in the

story that Professor Solomon narrates earlier, that Folman's "camera breaks". The fantasy and the animation stop and what is left is the actual footage taken from the camps: the real child similar to one described by Ben-Yishai and animated only a few minutes earlier now shown covered by rubble with only a few wisps of curly hair rising above it; the surviving women crying over the destruction and death.

At this point, not only have the individual stories of personal experiences during the war become one greater narrative of the massacre, but the individual and collective have become even further blurred by their confrontation with the same images. The last images that Folman and the audience face are not those created by him, but rather documented footage of the camps. These are the same images that others would have seen during the war on the evening news and it is the reporter himself, the man who would have presented those images to the public, who leads Folman and the audience to them. Here the collective memories of the war and this infamous event, memories that Ben-Yishai helped narrate in his original reporting in Lebanon, are rekindled and reflected upon. The ending is thus a dramatic turning point in the film when the animation and the dreams come to an end and Folman and the audience are confronted with an unfiltered collective memory.

The film's ending leads to a scene of shared witnessing depicting not only Folman's guilt and trauma in reflecting on what he has done, but society's as well. Both the protagonist and the audience are left in the same state of shock. As the animated young soldier turns to face the camera and the audience, he is confronted with the past and the documented images of the Sabra and Shatila camps after the massacre. Following his gaze, the audience shares in his witnessing as they too are faced with the same images and feeling of distress as the defences against the shock and the horror are lost, the fantasy and animation stop, and all are confronted with the new world order of the real. After having followed and been asked

to identify with the protagonist through his journey to find this missing memory, the audience is finally asked to identify with this confrontation. What has been sought and found has not been the image that was the missing picture in this narrative (as it has always existed in the archives), but rather Folman's and the collective's role in not only allowing but aiding in its perpetration.

The story expands beyond one of personal experience into one of a troubled collective experience that is haunted. The mixed feelings and questions of action, guilt, individual vs. state action, and silenced witnessing lead to position of what Raya Morag claims in terms of this film and this war (as well as other actions in the Israeli state) of "perpetrator trauma." Morag argues that a crucial element in addressing perpetrator trauma is not just on the individual level but a "complex negotiation of the discrepancies between the post-traumatic memories of individual soldiers, those of their army units, and, by implication, of the society that sent them" (2013: 3). In its overlapping of memories and acts of shared witnessing that encompass the soldiers, the army, and society, *Waltz with Bashir* enters this negotiation. The appearance of the "unwanted ghost" of the traumatized perpetrator becomes not only an issue for the individual but can, as in this case, lead to confrontation with the collective implications in violent activities designated by and carried out in the name of society. The acts witnessed at the end of the film are those that were "carried out in their (society's) name" (2013: 6) and have a shared responsibility.<sup>32</sup> The act of witnessing itself, however, does not resolve the past. Folman's animated image has led to this place but cannot speak for Folman, nor for the soldiers, society, and, least of all, for the Palestinians that flood the screen. In the final scene of footage from the Sabra and

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<sup>32</sup> In this discussion Morag also reflects on her position as part of this collective and what steps she and her own society need to and are taking in the process of reconciliation.

Shatila camp, a group of wailing women confront the camera and, implicitly, Folman and the audience, with their hands outstretched, crying “sawwaru waynkum?”, (“film, film, where were you?”) (Rastegar, 2013). Left untranslated in the film,<sup>33</sup> the women’s resurrected and still mysterious supplication in this new context highlights the continued inability of the film, and this footage in particular, to provide any answers or solutions regarding the massacre. As their cries fade out, the remainder of the film is silent; there are no words, no cries, only the images of death and of those whose voices could not make it into the film. Facing the images does not necessarily imbue meaning and the film leaves them open to interpretation and impression.

The past remains untranslated, as this event and its present place are still not comprehensible. What does the “discovery” of this memory mean to the protagonist who has now accomplished his quest and what does he do in the face of this memory? In turn, what does the audience, who have now become complicit protagonists, do with it? How do those that are still untranslated claim their stake in the past? The film leaves more questions than answers for both the protagonist and audience who are confronted by a past that has been uncovered but not yet interpreted.

Sharing in this final confrontation, the protagonist and viewer are also set up to share in the processing that comes after this tumultuous and unresolved conclusion. In this manner, Folman’s confrontation with this controversial past comes to be a story of not only his own, but of society’s relationship with and haunting by this past. While deeply personal, the film asserts its position in a larger collective dialogue by prompting reflection

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<sup>33</sup> One of the controversial points for which Folman was denounced in his inclusion of this footage was that he did not include the translation of what the women were saying. This site of contention contributes to those denouncing Folman for his avoiding essential ethical and political questions about the soldier’s and army’s position in Lebanon (Rastegar, 2013).

on a traumatic past whose implications and effects are not just experienced on an individual level but are shared by a collective.

## 7.6 Conclusion

*Waltz with Bashir* depicts Folman's search for his lost memory of the First Lebanon War and, bit by bit, his encounter with the past. Within the film's intermediate space, Folman is able to piece together the dreams, fantasies, and memories that capture the troubling aspects of a past that was traumatic and repressed. This approach relies on different stories and methods to counter individual and societal suppression. Representing that for which there are no pictures through animation, Folman brings to life the haunting aspects of an experience that is itself intermediate, stuck between the past and the present and the feelings of perpetration and victimization. Folman documents the personal and emotional state of his experience, rendering the narrative and images in their unresolved and liminal state so that he can witness that which has stayed hidden even in himself.

Despite the individual experience that guides *Waltz with Bashir* and seems to be its main goal, the film nevertheless goes beyond this to implicate and incorporate the collective. Not only is Folman's journey inspired by others, but it is dependent on those who share their experiences and memories of the past that help Folman find his own. In these exchanges, the film becomes not just Folman's story, but that of other Israeli soldiers deployed in the First Lebanon War. Further its release during a period in which several films were beginning a dialogue about this contentious and silent part of Israeli history position it as part of a larger discussion not only about the trauma of the soldiers but of a nation for whom this war is part of a larger narrative of violence.

As multiple stories are animated and integrated in the film, they break down

individual boundaries and collective silences to create a larger narrative that is multi- vocal. These stories bring to life different aspects of the past that both enrich the narrative while also showing that it is still being questioned and contended and that it varies even between friends. These varied voices both help Folman represent his experience as well as the collective experience of violence and trauma implicated in the unresolved history of this troubled past. Though taking the first steps to reconciliation with the past, the film refuses closure and instead produces shock. The ending is left open with the question of what, once the past is found, one does with it.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

### 8.1 Returns and Rebirths

The film *Pan's Labyrinth* ends with a story of death and rebirth. On the one hand, the Maquis have vanquished Vidal and look to continue their struggle in the New Spain. On the other hand, Ofelia succumbs to the violence of the country and is killed by Vidal. Her death, however, is not an end, but rather a beginning as her sacrifices in post-Civil War Spain allow her to enter the underground kingdom and restore her identity as Princess Moanna. As the fairy tale closes, bits of pollen waft through the enchanted forest and the storyteller assures the viewer that Ofelia/Moanna's legacy will continue and that, if one knows where to look for her, she will be found.

*Pan's Labyrinth* thus does not end on a point of closure but rather beginnings. The past is not buried and instead is positioned to return. What this return promises, and the good and the bad that it will bring, is the unknown that is still to come. This ending highlights a number of pressing questions related to trauma: Does trauma ever end? And when is one allowed to, or able to, move on? Trauma has an afterlife that carries it past any one precipitating event. The past returns, traumas pass on from one person to another, and homes and worlds remain unsettled.

The films examined in this thesis also ask when and how one can escape pasts that are anything but past. On a personal level, these questions appear repeatedly in the three autobiographical documentary fantasies examined here. In *The Blondes*, *The Missing Picture*, and *Waltz with Bashir*, memories of violent events experienced during childhood return and demand to be witnessed. Even when inhibited or ignored, the past still lingers. Folman and Panh return to their suppressed pasts in their middle age when the memories come back to



haunt them. At this point they choose to turn and confront it as they have denied them long enough. Carri also makes a conscious decision to pursue and confront her particular past in a society that has already dictated how she should interpret this narrative. Carri instead looks into how to share her unique experience and the questions it raises about how trauma affects multiple generations. The journeys of all three protagonists are inspired by the desire to confront these pasts and the hopes that the ghosts can be at least pacified, if not fully laid to rest.

The documentaries and fairy tale films show that this is not just an individual struggle but also a continual conflict faced by the collective. When ignored, the return of the past can perpetuate violence in the present and forestall futures. *Tale of the Three Jewels* and *Underground* both bring stories of the past to societies still undergoing confrontation and resolution in terms of their history. Coming out in times in which unsettled pasts were perpetuating regional violence, *Tale of the Three Jewels* and *Underground* demonstrate how the question of how to settle these pasts becomes both urgent and complicated. The international propagation of these films also raises questions of how these unsettled histories take on a new life beyond borders and enter greater dialogues of trauma diasporas.

This sharing of trauma is a contradictory process, as it is simultaneously grounded in exposing the past and putting it to rest. As individuals and societies look to the future, there is a conscious turning away from the past, but the ways that the past informs the present makes it difficult to completely turn one's back. Further suppressing the past can mean continuing its negative reverberations. As Rithy Panh asserts in regards to the importance of addressing the Cambodian past, which both he and the nation have struggled with the paradoxical desire to forget and face, "if you can't grieve, the violence continues" (1999).

This sentiment propels these films, as both individuals and groups affected by violent events face the return of trauma. However, they also recognize that in confronting the past, reconciliation is possible. The difficulty lies in how to represent and share this past. How does an individual or group work past the barriers of silences and suppressions and begin a journey into the unknown that presents a painful path, although the destination may offer resolution?

## **8.2 “The Unforgiving Temporality of Trauma”: Looking to the Past, Present, and Future**

Trauma shatters worlds, forcing the creation of new worlds or new world understandings. This search through and for new world orders is the journey into the unknown that seeks some kind of peace with the uncontrollable changes that have occurred. What is needed and appropriate during this search is both uncertain and contested. The journey into this troubled territory thus begins with recognition and openness to trauma’s particularities.

In her 2014 presidential address to the Modern Language Association “Connective Histories in Vulnerable Times”, Marianne Hirsch asked how, amidst all the pressures and changes of academia and society, “we can think beyond our own moment” (2014: 334). One path she suggests is through the very field of humanities in which she and her fellow addressees work. The “aesthetic encounters” that humanities teach “elicit a sense of vulnerability that can move us toward an ethics and a politics of open-endedness and mobility, attuning us to the needs of the present, to the potentialities for change, and to the future” (334). Hirsch also discerns this sense of vulnerability and, specifically, “*vulnerable times*” (335) in trauma and memory, which experiences an “unforgiving temporality” that sees “the inexorable repetition of the past in the present and future in which injury cannot

be healed or repaired but lives on, shattering worlds in its wake” (337). Despite trauma’s demands on the present, however, this inspires in Hirsch an opportunity to consider how “trauma might be expanded and redirected to open alternative temporalities that are more porous and future-oriented and that galvanize a sense of urgency about the need for change, now” (337). Though opening up to vulnerability and the contingent unknown seems like something to be avoided, this position suggests acknowledging and addressing multiple voices and conflicting histories from the past and present, which can all be brought into the building of a new future.

The purpose for delving into Hirsch’s statements is twofold: not only is Hirsch questioning the future of her field of study, but she is also questioning the future of trauma. This thesis wishes to end on similar future-oriented questions, both in terms of the study of fantasy as well as trauma’s place in the future. Trauma shatters several aspects of the familiar, including time. In its “unforgiving temporality” and creation of “vulnerable times,” trauma challenges a fundamental way in which we order our lives. However, it also presents new ways to conceive of and approach time that can either restore order or lead to the possibility of a new order.

This possibility, as Hirsch points out, depends on a need for openness and subsequent vulnerability. Fantasy, as a journey into the unknown, relies on the viewer to surrender to possibility. In its defiance of confining borders and temporalities, fantasy can offer a more porous temporality and can be, as the examples identified in this study show, future-oriented. Studying fantasy, an aspect of film and media studies that is new and still gaining acceptance, also requires an act of vulnerability; it asks that preconceptions be left behind and requires openness. As fantasy continues to be a popular genre that crosses borders it demands examination that can enrich conceptions of both present and future.

Part of this receptiveness to fantasy is recognizing the contributions it can make to the study of other areas, such as trauma. The use of fantasy in vastly different cultural contexts worldwide shows that there is something compelling filmmakers to use this genre to approach trauma. One appealing characteristic fantasy has to offer is that the journey of fantasy mirrors that of trauma as both are undertakings into the unknown. The world that fantasy presents is an intermediate space that is at once recognizable and yet unfamiliar as the known orders have been slightly changed. This liminal space allows for the sharing of stories that defy linear narrative conventions and challenge the desire for a definitive truth or story.

While allowing for multiple, conflicting stories, fantasy also presents the struggle of this mediation. It offers an engaging framework for journeying through the in-between and encourages the exploration of new situations and understandings, as opposed to offering a preconceived explanation and conclusion. The external narrative of fantasy also presents a defiant struggle to society. Fantasy is a subversive narrative that unsettles dominant histories and exposes their suppressions and fragilities. In historical cases where certain sides have been silenced and left out of history, and thus denied the space to confront and reconcile, fantasy allows for challenges and the insertion of new stories and dialogues.

The flexibility of fantasy also provides a means to telling and witnessing experiences that defy retelling. As the cases examined here show, trauma hinders expression, as it is a representation of the unimaginable. Fantasy offers diverse modes that can communicate the range of emotions, experiences, and understandings of not only violent events, but their afterlives.

Beyond the individual, fantasy also presents a collective, transnational appeal.

Fantasy can provide the comfort of familiarity during times of upheaval. It is not tied to one particular group or period and can transverse time and place as it tells its story across borders. Film heightens this mutability, especially in cases of co-productions, festival favourites, or box-office hits, which can easily take on new life across the world. As a well-recognized form, fantasy provides the cross-cultural appeal that allows for these films to not only cross borders but to become popular beyond their place of production.

Finally, perhaps the most important thing fantasy has to offer is the possibility to hope and dream of new worlds to come.

### **8.3 A Gift to Future Generations**

The fairy tale films in this study end forestalled. The protagonists that have undertaken their journeys guided by hope end in a troubled, liminal space, in which they are both defeated and yet have in some way achieved a goal. The Youssef's broken body, as well as that of Ofelia's, in the last scenes of *Tale of the Three Jewels* and *Pan's Labyrinth* are overpowered by the unforgiving tides of history. Yet these hopeful heroes still offer the dream of overcoming these circumstances. As Youssef dies, he reveals the story of how he actually managed to find and restore the three missing jewels that he had been seeking. Ofelia too pictures for herself an ending different from the cold death in the labyrinth. As she bleeds in Mercedes' arms, it is revealed that she too has completed her journey and has been restored in her underground kingdom as the princess she truly is. The very final shots of the landscapes these characters traversed in their journeys, the beaches of Gaza and the Spanish forests, are at once now void of their presence and yet at the same time imbued with their hope. *Pan's Labyrinth* ends with the promise that if one looks, he or she can even see the small, magical traces that continue to populate the landscape with Ofelia's hopes and dreams.

Another profound example of a defiantly hopeful ending despite a violent history is the conclusion of *Underground*. After the final scenes of the film's primary narrative leave the principal characters dead on the bloody battlefield that was once their home, they revive for a final confrontation. Forgiving history, the characters move forward uncompromised by their past. As they dance and revel in their reunification and celebration, the land they are standing on breaks away, floating to new futures. The storyteller turns to the audience and proclaims that this story will be told to "our children, and our children's children." The story, which had started out as dedicated to "our father's children" (Kusturica's generation), ends belonging to the future generations who will take these stories and shape them into their own future.

Even in the bleakest of times, which are often faced in these stories, the fairy tale continues to offer hope. In this sense it becomes, as Carroll puts it, a "love gift" (quoted in Bettelheim, 1976: 27) to those struggling; it gives hope and a map for passing through difficult times. The films and documentaries examined in this study offer the hope that trauma can be approached and, if not wholly excised, at least settled.

While in these troubled times fantasy and fairy tales might seem to be the most distant to the changes occurring in the world, they can actually be the most accessible. Walter Benjamin reminds that "whenever good counsel was at a premium, the fairy tale had it, and where the need was greatest, its aid was nearest" (1969: 11). The worlds of fantasy are themselves unsettled, familiar and yet unfamiliar, and their stories and journeys through them are lessons in how to navigate these estranged terrains. Thus when good counsel is critical because a problem is so strange and unbelievable, it is fantasy that offers the space to approach this unfamiliar terrain and the hope to work through it.

The hope and ability to imagine new futures offered by fantasy narratives also applies

to hopes for the genre. Pursuing the study of fantasy and creating serious investigations of its themes, methods, and contributions to society demonstrates the desire to recognize fantasy equally in genre studies. Further, the greater acceptance of fantasy beyond the already self-identified fantasy scholars can lead to broader recognition of the contributions of diverse forms of representation in trauma studies. While there is still much ground to be covered before this point is reached, fantasy is well along its way on this path.

Hirsch reminds that though these paths to the unknown are available, they require openness and vulnerability in order to see where they lead. “In reading, looking, and listening, we necessarily allow ourselves to be vulnerable as we practice openness, interconnection, and imagination and as we acknowledge our own implication and complicity” (2014: 339). Opening up to vulnerability requires that experience and history be read not as a defined narrative or final conclusion, but rather as a fluid one in which different times, stories, and experiences come together and enrich a story even though they may contradict each other.

Fantasy demands this openness and vulnerability while at the same time creates the space in which the explorations in this state are encouraged. As the traumas in this study are unresolved, haunting individuals and collectives whose past continues to manifest in their lives, there is the desire to open up new paths of discovery that can lay these ghosts to rest. These films open themselves up to confronting the past and building paths to new futures. Though these futures are also unknowns that may not offer resolution, they are turned to in the hope that they can offer some type of peace with the past and that these stories can be passed on not as a burden but as a “love gift”.

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